

## **“The Word of the Lord Grows through the Lord’s Servants”**

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Growth is natural to the kingdom of heaven. The reign of Jesus Christ and the blessings and glories and peace He brings are not natural to sinners, but what is impossible with man is possible with God (Luke 18:27). Growth comes naturally in God’s kingdom because He is a God of the living and not of the dead (Luke 20:38). He does not save us for death or stagnation. We are brought into His kingdom for life and growth. If anyone is in Christ, there is growth because there is a new creation, new life, health, strength, joy.

But we see very little and very sparse growth. Shrinkage, closure, and at a minimum the fear of those things are familiar to our congregations. We know worries about the building and its deferred maintenance and about the average age of Sunday attenders and how we can get younger families that would sustain its future. The sheer depressing familiarity of those questions and many like them means I will not waste your time in rehearsing them or their implications for our church and its future. You know stagnation in the church and the death of congregations, but what about life and growth?

Are life and growth still possible? Can we not only endure or persist or hang on by our fingernails, desperate and distressed? Can we do more? Can we flourish? Can the kingdom come to us afresh and expand beyond us? The basis for hope is not our circumstances or vaccination records or congregational coffers. Those things fluctuate, come and go, some remain, some pass away. Like the people in the pews and the pastors in the pulpits, the metrics we use for the church and its health tell all kinds of different stories, have all kinds of different perspectives, but all fail to stay. People, pastors, congregations, districts, and church bodies come and go, but the

word of the Lord endures forever. God calls us home someday, but His mission goes on until the Last Day. And Luke writes again and again in his first account of the church's history and of the mission of Jesus, "the Word of the Lord grew" (Acts 13:49, 19:20).

*What is growth?*

Luke's account of the growth of the Lord's Word is not about the financial circumstances or political climate of the first century AD. By the numbers, the church of Jesus is less numerically impressive as its mission spreads outward from the founding ethnic group of Aramaic- and Greek-speaking Jews to the varieties of largely Greek-speaking Gentiles. The thousands converted on Pentecost through the preaching of Peter are reduced to small groups (often families) and sometimes to individuals as the mission goes into the whole world beginning from Jerusalem. There are crowds present and willing to hear how Peter proclaimed the risen Jesus, but by the end of the book, the crowds Paul encounters are almost uniformly hostile.

The money in the Book of Acts flows opposite to the weight of numbers. If the mostly Gentile churches are less numerically impressive than the Jewish churches in Judea, the Gentile churches are generally wealthier and not subject to the same economic depressions and food shortages found in Judea. So the collection Paul takes up over the course of Acts is delivered to the Judean churches. No particular accounting of precise totals donated or written off for tax purposes is provided. We know only that the Judean churches lacked much and that the Gentile churches had much to give and gave cheerfully (2 Cor. 9:1).

If numbers and money fluctuate greatly, so too does harmony in the church. Luke is a very charitable and kind writer reluctant to criticize even Apollos for talking too much before he required correction from Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:26). Luke does not put anyone inside the

church in a bad light; only unbelievers and apostates receive direct criticism. Yet Luke does show us the unspoken dynamics of the church as the word of the Lord is growing, and the church dynamics are often poor and contentious. The Judean churches are initially strong, but even as they suffer persecution from Herod Antipas and economic problems, they continue to badger the largely Gentile churches outside Judea for being insufficiently Jewish, specifically, for not requiring circumcision as a mark of belonging to Christ (Acts 15:1). The Judean churches produce little growth and do not send forth missionaries as do the Gentile churches, but some of them find time to demand that the Gentile churches should conform to their unscriptural concept of how to be a Christian. The most fruitful portions of the vine of Christ may be subject to the shrill demands and accusations of less fruitful branches of the vine. Though the Judean churches were rich in numbers (Acts 2:41, 4:4) and in heritage, they were poor in devotion to the mission and rich in accusation of their brothers.

Growth is not in numbers or in money or in organizational dysfunction. Growth is in and because of the word of the Lord. Growth occurred sometimes by thousands and sometimes by ones, but why? Why would there be such a difference in results? If the growth is in the Word of the Lord, then we know that we have no control over that Word's growth anymore than we control the Lord Himself. Remember that when the growth of God's kingdom is discussed in Mark's gospel, the farmer who sows the seed of the Word goes to sleep and gets up for the day, and the seed grows "he knows not how" (Mark 4:27). We are farmers, workers in the vineyard, not lords of the vineyard. We do not control the Word or the mission or the growth, but we do control our effort in sowing, in planting, and in tending the Word. Peter could not control the numbers who believed his message because "as many as were appointed to eternal life, believed" (Acts 13:48). God controls the number of believers, but we control whether our mouths speak

His Name or remain silent. Growth is His to give according to the nature of the living God Who rules over His growing kingdom, but activity in that growth is ours to do or to leave undone. We do not choose to be in the kingdom, but we can choose to be Jerusalem full of complaints and demands or Antioch full of missionaries headed out to the world (Acts 13:1-3).

*Who is the main character in the mission?*

There is a time-lapse between Jesus's commandment to preach the gospel to every nation and the church's activity in preaching the gospel. That first period of waiting is itself divinely commanded. There is a time for waiting and for prayer, for gathering in expectation of what God will do according to His promises for the church and for the whole world through the church. That time ended on Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came down on the apostles, who began to proclaim the gospel in the languages understood in that upper room (Acts 2:8). Then the time for silence was over.

There is another time-lapse between Pentecost and the outward movement of the church, between the power to preach the gospel and the preaching of the gospel to the surrounding peoples (Acts 8:4). This time-lapse is not divinely commanded. Jesus gave no sense in his command to proclaim the gospel "beginning from Jerusalem" that the church should largely remain in Jerusalem until people felt comfortable being with Gentiles or were moving anyway for a job or some other secondary circumstance. Jesus provided only one time-lapse – between Ascension and Pentecost – but the church presumed that there would be another time-lapse – between Pentecost and their sense of the right time and the right way to evangelize the nations. Persecution is the catalyst for proclamation outside Jerusalem and beyond the new community's internal strife over distribution to the widows of various linguistic groups.

This early misunderstanding of the Lord's sense of time for His church persists in our circles most clearly in the quote attributed to Luther that the "gospel is a passing rain shower (*fahrender Platzregen*),"<sup>1</sup> a rainstorm that springs up suddenly and pours down ferociously for a brief time. After that, it's gone, and the sun comes out again. The clouds move on elsewhere. Luther was trying, it seems, to articulate that the gospel is not under the church's control, which is true. The word of the Lord grows in Acts, and the worker in the Lord's field "knows not how" all that growth happens in Mark, as we have seen.

The most obvious difficulty with this remark of Luther is that Luther is not Scripture. His dicta and his opinions are merely opinions until substantiated by Scripture, and Scripture could have taught the same things to us directly from the source. Luther himself wished in several places that his own writings should disappear if they ever threatened to eclipse the reading and understanding of Scripture, as had happened in his own lifetime prior to the Reformation. Scripture's descriptions of the Christ, His mission, His sense of time, and His church's responsibilities decide what the church should do, not any other writing, much less one perhaps misinterpreted.

The misinterpretation easily gleaned by sinful flesh from that Luther quote is that since the gospel is not under our control, maybe the gospel has passed on, as rain showers do. I have no control over the storm front that came through in the night, thundered mightily, and is gone by the time I wake up. Just so, the thinking goes, with the gospel. Thus I have no responsibility to worry about, much less engage in, planting churches or evangelizing my neighbor because the

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<sup>1</sup> WA 15:32, 7 = AE 45:352.

thing is out of my hands, above my pay grade—choose your euphemism for inactive irresponsibility.

This misunderstands both the Lord's sense of time and Who the main character is in the Book of Acts. The Lord's sense of time is that the present time is a time of urgency. The apostles and preachers in the Book of Acts travel as much as they do and as widely as they do because they are trying to spread news. It is in the nature of news to be spread as rapidly as possible. "Old news" is useless. The distances covered and the varieties of people encountered in the Book of Acts are because at least some of the church understood the gospel's urgency. It is true that we are not in control of the gospel's growth nor are we in control of the Lord's timing. His Spirit blows where He wills (John 3:8), and He will return in glory with His holy angels whenever He wills (Mark 8:38). Right now, all that we can do is to preach the gospel. That's why the apostle Paul said with such intense urgency to the wayward Corinthians, "Behold, *now* is the acceptable time! Behold, *now* is the day of salvation" (Isaiah 49:8 = 2 Cor. 6:2). There is no better time for us to preach the gospel than now, since our Lord has committed the preaching of the gospel to His church, not the management of time. We don't have time to kill, but we do have the gospel to preach.

Preaching the gospel urgently to as many as possible honors the fact that the main character in the Book of Acts and thus in the church's history down to the Lord's return is *never* someone merely and only human. The main character in the first nine or ten chapters of Acts is not Peter. The main character in the last eighteen or nineteen chapters of Acts is not Paul. If one of them or some other prominent early churchman such as James were, there would be some continuous refrain throughout Acts that "James glorified the Lord's Word and grew in favor with God and with men" or "Paul proclaimed the gospel to all nations and grew in stature throughout

Asia/Judea/Italy” or something to that effect. Instead, the growth we find in Luke’s gospel of the Word sown in Mary’s womb and growing in wisdom in the temple when he was twelve and culminating in His predicted crucifixion and resurrection on the third day is the same growth we find in the Book of Acts: the Word of the Lord, Jesus Christ, moving and growing in glory throughout the nations. The glory that was first manifested to Mary in her Annunciation spreads by the end of the Book of Acts to Rome, where His glory and His salvation are praised in the very same place that Caesar Augustus had decreed all the world should be taxed (Lk. 2:1).

The main character and the Lord of time are the same Person: Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ has commanded us to preach the gospel to every nation, and that gospel concerning His glory and cross and resurrection is our primary concern as the church, not any of the circumstances or timing or awkwardness or anything else that we would like to control but finally do not control. The desire for control was the desire of the Judean churches who had done practically nothing for the Gentiles – that is, the whole rest of the world except for their coethnics in the diaspora – but that desire for control over timing and circumstance is ungodly and unfaithful. Ours is not to judge the Lord’s sending of the gospel to this or that nation or place or at this or that time. Ours is to preach the gospel of the Lord.

*The greatest difficulty in the mission: ourselves*

If growth is natural for the Word of the Lord, divine growth is unnatural for sinners. Recall the proportions in the parable of the sower in Mark 4. Jesus broke down the responses to the sowing of the Word into 1) what was sown on the footpath, 2) what was sown among thorns, 3) what was sown where weeds sprang up, too, and 4) what was sown in good soil. Three parts out of four yield little or no growth followed by the destruction of growth through satanic malice (Mark 4:15) or faintness of heart (Mark 4:17) or human greed (Mark 4:19). Growth is natural to

God's Word, but growth is fragile. So many things may crowd into the human heart to supplant the divine Word.

The main character in Acts is the Word of the Lord, but that does not make the human characters unimportant or negligible. The fact that God is doing something uniquely divine in bringing men into eternal life through His Word does not mean that human factors are irrelevant. The drama of Acts is not that the Word of the Lord grows according to Christ's promise; the drama is that the Word grows despite all the human obstacles, all the human, all-too-human people with their ever-new flaws, hesitations, and strife without and within. Indeed, the Word grows *through* those all-too-human people such as Peter and Paul and Barnabas.

Through Peter the Jews in Jerusalem hear the gospel on Pentecost, and thousands turn that day to Christ. Through Paul the Gentiles are called according to prophecy and being to glorify the God of Israel Who raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead. Through Barnabas the church is built up and encouraged through his gifts and his demeanor through many adversities. Peter was confused about how the gospel message affected his behavior around Gentiles, especially when his coethnics from Jerusalem were watching him. Peter withdrew from eating with Gentiles under implicit or explicit social pressure. Paul was confused about what God had promised in the Scriptures and devoted himself to persecuting the followers of the Way of Jesus until Jesus called him in a prophetic scene like Isaiah's or Jeremiah's, intervening directly in his path and setting him on a completely different path. Barnabas was nicknamed as an encourager (Acts 4:36) but could not agree with Paul on how the mission of Jesus should be carried out and whether John Mark was still fit for service to Christ (Acts 15:37-39).

This tells us that perhaps the greatest difficulty in the mission of Jesus is not the knowledge of what Jesus has done for the whole world nor of relating that gospel to the world.



Luke spends relatively little time on the miracle of translation at Pentecost, and we hear precious little about how evangelists or teachers were trained in the earliest days of the church. The logistics of the gospel are secondary to something about the gospel workers in Acts that we learn much of and that we find in spades in Paul's own letters: the weakness of the messenger.

Over the next two sessions we will explore the messenger's weakness, especially as Paul relates it at length to us in his letters. What did the apostle to the Gentiles think was getting in the way of the gospel, of the natural spread of the word of the Lord? What were his own weaknesses, and what weaknesses belonged to his opponents within the church? Self-assessment, realism, and repentance will guide our exploration of what stumbling blocks arose as the word of the Lord spread through Paul and through the whole earliest church. We will then explore by what means and methods the gospel did spread. When the Word of the Lord grows, how does it grow? How does it leap over and around and through the stumbling blocks we find inside ourselves and in the world? How does it continue to spread throughout the world despite the world's hostility and the foolishness and mutual biting and devouring inside the church that carries the gospel to the world? The questions in all of these things will boil down to two: what needs to change about the Lord's servant and what does not need to change about the Lord's servant as the Word of the Lord grows.

These large questions are both answerable from the New Testament and profitable for the mission of Jesus today. We can in fact know from God's Word what will generally get in the way of the gospel and what will not, what weaknesses we share with the apostles and evangelists of the earliest church and what Jesus will perfect through our weakness. We do not have to be in doubt about either His message or our insufficiency to carry that message to a dying world. We

do not have to be in doubt that He will work mightily through that message, however weak the messenger or however few the believers.

We can also find immense profit and treasures abounding in His Word for our own day. Acts and the letters of Paul do not exist as a lockbox of certain doctrines, set away safely on a shelf for you to take down and look at on an idle, rainy afternoon. Musing over the artifacts of yesteryear you contemplate what use they might've had in their day, as if you were looking at the Bible the way you might look at colonial-era tools at a historic site – interesting but now useless. No, the Bible is written to teach us and to guide us in the Way of righteousness Jesus has set out for us, the Way of Jesus and of Paul and of all believers in every age. Acts and the letters of Paul are written like all Scripture for our instruction so that we can gain wisdom from them about the gospel, about our weakness, and about how the gospel can go forward most profitably. Knowing the Scriptures more deeply we will become more firmly committed to the absolute priority and absolute joy of carrying the gospel message to an unbelieving world and calling the lost to find their home in the body of Christ, the household of God, the church.

*Paul's conversion a paradigm for change and for continuity (Acts 9:1-31)*

The conversion of Saul on his way to persecute the followers of Jesus is our departure point because it contains so much that will matter for understanding Paul's mission, his methods on mission, and the significance of Jesus's turning the persecutor of the church to an apostle of the church. Acts 9 will guide our first exploration into the nature of the mission of Jesus and the weakness of the messenger of Jesus.

Saul's conversion is a death in the image of Jesus. He had his mind and heart set on one thing, mind and heart are completely disoriented on the way to Damascus, and then for three

days he can see nothing nor does he eat or drink (Acts 9:8). He becomes as if dead in order to be raised up as a servant to bear the name of Jesus to the Gentiles. What is old, and what is new in Saul who will be called Paul?

What endures from before his conversion to after his conversion is his fervency. Saul was determined to persecute the churches of God, both men and women, with particular savagery because he believed they were twisting the word of God, misunderstanding the Scripture, and proclaiming a false Messiah in proclaiming the name of Jesus. To accomplish that mission of persecution, Saul used letters from Jerusalem to Damascus, letters that connect communities together and unite them along the same lines – in this case, lines of persecution – so that there is one united front against the misunderstanding of Scripture and the growth of error.

That fervency does not change after Saul's heart had changed. Using the more common name of Paul, Saul will use letters to connect communities together in their understanding of Scripture, keeping Christ as the beating heart of the entire Bible and building up the churches of God in love and holiness. Saul will pursue those goals with particular fervency, planting churches throughout the eastern Mediterranean and according to his desire throughout the entire Mediterranean world, a breadth of action in the name of Jesus unmatched by anyone else in the earliest church. When Saul's mind and heart change, what we would call his personality does not. God uses that fervent personality for His own gracious purposes instead of Saul's once-firm convictions about the evil of Jesus and of His followers.

But mind and heart must change, and to intervene in the life of a fervent man takes something radical. The intervention of Jesus and His identification of Himself as the One whom Saul is truly persecuting in persecuting His followers rearrange everything in Saul, confusing and disordering his previously firm conviction that the Lord was not the same person as Jesus. The

pronouncement that “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting” (Acts 9:5) means that in seeking the life of Christians, Saul has been seeking the life of Jesus. In seeking to destroy the Church, Saul has sought to destroy the Christ. Jesus and the Church are one flesh, and to murder one is to murder the other at the same time. Saul’s personality will not and does not change, but his grasp of Scripture and the deepest motivations of his heart must change and do change so that Jesus’s gracious purpose of having Saul bear His mighty Name to the nations may be accomplished.

So what’s in the way? Not us, but our thoughts. Not us, but our motivations. Not us, but our deepest drives. Saul’s entire life will be reoriented and rearranged according to the purposes of Jesus, but Saul will still be fervent. Saul’s mind will be changed about innumerable passages of Scripture that he will now know center on and around Jesus, but Saul will still orient his life by the Scripture as he did before. Saul’s deepest drive will be to suffer for the Name of Jesus and to proclaim the Name of Jesus, but Saul will still be willing to travel for the sake of God’s Name as he was before. We are altogether changed by the purposes and the grace of Christ, but we remain ourselves. We must change altogether for those purposes to be accomplished through us, but when they are accomplished, the praise will be His and we will be servants who have merely done what was asked of us (Luke 17:10). In accomplishing His purposes through us, Jesus gives us a foretaste of resurrection as He did to Saul whom He gave back his sight after three days – we are seized by him but enjoy the liberty of the sons of God through Him, we are dead in Him but behold! we live! We are altogether changed but we recognize ourselves still. Saul remained Saul although his feet went on an altogether new path.

*What had to change?*

It will serve us well to understand in greater depth from his own writings what exactly was old in Paul and had to become new, what needed to change before he could be useful to the

Master. This will be highly useful to us as we ponder how the Word of the Lord could grow in our time and in the places we live, inauspicious as those places and this time may seem to us. We cannot be daunted by what we find likely or unlikely, easy or hard to do. Jesus did not work with likely material for mission to the Gentiles in choosing to use Saul. Jesus did not call Saul to a life of relative ease in his home city. Likelihood or relative ease are irrelevant to the mission.

What was relevant were three things that needed to change for Paul before he could be useful himself to the spread of the Word of the Lord: his understanding of Holy Scripture's meaning; how he should use the gifts God had given him; and the direction his life would have to take, setting him on a path of outward-moving mission instead of outward-moving persecution. The persecutor would become the persecuted, and Jesus would be glorified through the suffering of His apostle (Acts 9:16). The necessity of change was as dire for Saul as it perhaps is for us. We and Saul are accustomed to certain things, certain ways of thinking, certain presumptions about what God wants. Without openness to correction we will not be anymore useful to the Master than Saul would have been to Jesus if Saul had not been blinded so that he could die through baptism with Christ at the hands of Ananias and rise with Christ to a life of suffering service.

#### *1. His understanding of Scripture (2 Cor. 3:7-4:6)*

We easily undervalue how much Paul's mind changed because we take for granted many insights particularly bright and well-known since the Reformation that are accents in Paul: justification by faith, God's sole responsibility for His people's salvation, the undeserving nature of sinners who inherit sin and commit sins, the rich kindnesses of Christ in justifying the ungodly. Since these things are well-known among us, many other things connected to these teachings are obscured for us within Paul: why he spoke openly and boldly, why he was very

public about his motivations and his actions, why he desired to spread the gospel to every creature.

Those actions make sense only in light of Paul's doctrines. Doctrine and practice aren't two different things for Paul anymore than breathing in and breathing out are two separable things for you. If you are doing the one well, you'll do the other well. If you have trouble breathing in, you won't do so well breathing out. If Paul's doctrine about Christ or the Scripture or the gospel were, for example, hidden, secret, or hard to understand, Paul would not have said that in preaching that gospel, "we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor. 4:2). Why "everyone" if the doctrine Paul taught was arcane or strange? Why "everyone's conscience" if Paul does not expect people to have a conscience to which he can appeal and on which he can make claims about sin and about righteousness and about judgment? Because Paul's doctrine is public, Paul's practice is public. Because Paul's doctrine is for everyone, Paul's practice is for everyone. Because Paul's gospel must reach every human being, Paul's practice must reach every human being.

Moses's doctrine was public only for Israel and was intended to bring death. It had a peculiar glory because it was divinely ordained, but its glory was not the center of Scripture. It brought condemnation on those who heard it preached, either in Moses's own day or in reading Moses's writings in the Law. It was there to imprison everything under sin so that the world's mouth might be stopped and everyone held accountable to God for sin. Moses's doctrine is necessary, but it brings finally only death.

A reading of Scripture centered on human beings will always leave us with a veil over our hearts such as Moses had to wear over his face. If we find nothing more in Scripture than ourselves and what we must do, we will find nothing more glorious than death as the outcome.

Notice that Paul asserts that listening only to Moses, only to the Law, has an actual result in death, “for the letter kills,” not as if all written things are bad but because all that the Law can do finally is kill us. It has no greater power.

This matters desperately for the people in our congregations and the people not yet in our congregations because apart from the Spirit of God, their lives, even when reading Scripture much less doing the things most people do instead of reading Scripture, are headed for death and haunted by death. They can see it coming, they know on some level that they deserve it, and their conscience gives them no peace. Apart from the Spirit, there is only slavery, and slavery is the natural state of man apart from the Lord, even Paul’s own people reading the Scriptures apart from Christ, over whose hearts a veil lay, smothering everything underneath it. There is no freedom, no life, no peace, no breathing in and out, no rest apart from the Spirit of freedom.

How does freedom come? Through turning to the Lord. Paul’s urgency in 2 Corinthians and in Galatians where he sees salvation on the line through false doctrine is the urgency of freedom from slavery. If you were enslaved to someone, wouldn’t you urgently want to be free? Paul sees even Bible readers, let alone the rest of humanity who know nothing of God’s Word, as enslaved so long as they do not understand Christ as the heart and the Author of Scripture. Even Bible readers see nothing without Christ, “only through Christ is it [the veil] taken away.” (2 Cor. 3:14) When one turns to the Lord, there is freedom (2 Cor. 3:16).

See how the doctrine and the practice coincide. Since Paul understands the Scriptures to center on Christ, he proclaims Christ as one with a glory greater than Moses and whose preaching leads to life, while Moses’s preaching leads to death. Since Paul knows that man apart from Christ is enslaved with a hardened heart, Paul proclaims Christ as the Liberator from sin and the renewed heart as full of mercy and comfort for those in need of mercy and comfort.

Those doctrines of hermeneutics (how you read the Bible), christology (who Jesus is), and sin (what's wrong with us) drive Paul's practice, which is the public and incessant and urgent proclamation of Jesus as the Savior.

You cannot separate Paul's doctrine from his practice. His practice of urgent gospel proclamation is driven by his doctrine. He "does not lose heart" (2 Cor. 4:1) because the ministry of the gospel is due to God's mercy just as the gospel itself is good news for us due to God's mercy. The reason he can be resilient through every kind of difficulty is because the ministry is God's and leads to freedom for Paul's hearers. Some will not listen, of course, because they love death more than life and desire continued condemnation and slavery more than the freedom the gospel brings. It is true Paul was not always successful and neither should we expect to be always successful. But it is also true that Paul is always diligent in proclamation – widely, frequently, boldly – because the gospel must be made public.

Paul did not use tricks, what he calls "disgraceful, underhanded ways," (2 Cor. 4:2) nor did he soft-peddle the doctrines of the gospel as if he were allowed to water down the drink God had prepared. Instead, Paul served the doctrines of the gospel up to his hearers as a waiter serves what the chef has prepared, not changing it, not messing with the ingredients, but simply bringing what's been fixed to the table. Paul is always going public with the gospel because God desires to make men free through the gospel – free from sin, free from condemnation, free from death.

And this gospel is nothing less than the rising of the sun, as ineluctably and insistently public as the sun shining in the sky on a clear day. The God who in the beginning made the light shine out of the enveloping, smothering darkness has caused His light to shine now in our hearts. That light is the knowledge in the Scriptures and through the preaching of faithful men that



God's glory is revealed, unveiled, and unmasked in the kind and merciful face of Jesus Christ, not veiled as Moses was but showing Himself openly to the whole world, desiring its redemption. Our proclamation of the Word of the Lord must be as public and as insistent as the sun shining in the sky for all to see.

2. *His use of God's gifts (Col. 1:24-29)*

Paul's sense of purpose in his new life in Christ is so intense that he is capable of doing two things that seem very strange to us: rejoicing in his sufferings and claiming that he fills up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of His body, the church. What is the role of suffering in Paul's ministry, and how can Christ lack something so that the apostle would fill it up to a fuller measure?

Paul's understanding of the gospel's spread is that it comes from God. It is His will that the gospel should spread, as it is His will in the Acts of the Apostles that the Word of the Lord should grow. That's why we began where we did in saying that the growth of the kingdom of God is natural according to the nature God Himself has given to it, a vine always spreading, a field where new growth is happening. Within that field and on that vine God has given to his church the stewardship "to make the word of God fully known" (Col. 1:25). The purpose of Paul's ministry, which was divinely given him, is to make known what God has said and whom God has designated as the Messiah, the Savior from sin and death.

How does Paul make the word of God fully known? The two parts to that proclamation that he details in Col. 1 are "warning everyone" and "teaching everyone" (Col. 1:28). The "everyone" whom we saw in 2 Cor. as "everyone's conscience" is now everyone's being rightly warned and rightly taught. The warning is a note concerning sin and judgment that Paul always

struck in proclaiming to unbelievers. He does not preach that way because he likes being harsh or mean categorically. He preaches sin and judgment because those are the things that make contact with, that appeal to, that strike a person's conscience. They connect. They are harsh realities of life apart from Christ, and people wake up to those things, get a lively sense of their sin and of divine judgment on their sin, when the preacher warns them concerning sin and judgment. The content of that message is not Paul's or ours but Christ's.

Paul also teaches everyone because once the conscience is made restless through the proclamation of sin and judgment, it must learn Christ and His salvation. Since that knowledge of Christ does not come naturally to sinners, it must be taught as we have to learn to drive or to manage our finances well or any number of other things that unlike breathing in and out do not come naturally. "Warning everyone and teaching everyone" is the sum of how Paul appeals to "everyone's conscience," and this use of his gifts is a use under and for the sake of the ministry Christ has given him.

Paul fundamentally understands his ministry and the whole of his life surrounding that ministry as a stewardship. That is, I am not who I am, I don't do what I do, I don't talk or live or think the way I do by my own accomplishment. I am who I am, do what I do, talk, live, think, act the way I do because of Christ and for the sake of making Christ known. There is no room in Paul's life for things that don't have to do with Christ. When he compares himself to a good athlete or a good soldier, the point he makes is that everything he is and has and does is for the sake of making Christ known.

I do not repeat these teachings of Scripture to make you admire Paul. He did not write these things to make you admire him. I repeat them and he wrote them so that you can be inspired to consider what these things mean for you. Consider not only what negative or twisted

or dark things need to be taken out of your life like trash from underneath the basement stairs. Consider, too, what positive and wholesome and bright things need to be used more effectively in the Master's service. If your whole life and all your gifts and powers are from Him, then you are always His steward, even in breathing in and out, much less in spreading the gospel in whatever realm of life you find yourself today. You can accept suffering and even rejoice in suffering when you understand it as part of God's stewardship, part of His gifts, useful to you for what it changes about you and thus changes others through you. You are not alone in suffering, and your Father's hand is on you for your good even through suffering.

You are not alone in suffering, and you live every second within the church, the body of Christ. Paul took that so seriously that he understood his own afflictions as being part of Jesus's afflictions, such that Jesus's afflictions were not yet at an end until the afflictions His church suffers had come to end. Paul does not think Jesus was lacking in His suffering for sin on our behalf, but Paul understood that Jesus was suffering through His body in Paul's ministry and before Paul's ministry so that when Paul was persecuting the men and even the women of the church, he was persecuting Christ, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" (Acts 9:4)

So if you suffer, your Father will use those things as gifts just as He has made everything else in your life His gift. If you are afflicted, your Brother and Savior Jesus is afflicted in you and with you, and His presence in your life, "Christ in you," is the hope of glory (Col. 1:27), the promise that the One who is now hidden in our midst under His words and in His Body and Blood will one day be revealed to our sight, glorious. In that hope we warn and teach everyone, making the word of God fully known (Col. 1:25).

### *3. His sense of direction in life (Phil. 3:12-21)*

If Paul compares himself to an athlete, he must have a goal. An athlete doesn't work and sacrifice and sweat without some goal, some purpose, some prize in front of his mind's eye. He does not "box as one beating the air" (1 Cor. 9:26). An athlete has something he is working for, heading toward, striving for. When there is no work and no direction and no striving, we can assume someone has given up the contest, given up the fight, believes he has already won or doesn't need to work anymore, as if he were already retired or dead. If we are not active in spreading the gospel, do we believe the resurrection has already come and our work is done? If Jesus has not yet returned, how can we be lethargic, as if we ran the race, it's over, and we can now relax?

Paul's sense of direction comes straight from his gospel. His doctrine drives his practice. His fervency does not come from his own perfection, his own sense that he has everything figured out and worked out. He says clearly, "Not that I have already obtained [the resurrection] or am already perfect" (Phil. 3:12). Paul does not speak from a mountaintop, telling us all what to do because he can do everything and anything. He speaks instead from beside us, as a fellow striver, offering wisdom as a father gives his son help and instruction in life. So what wisdom does Paul have for our direction in life?

"Press on"! Paul presses on because Christ has already claimed Paul. If Christ's claim on Paul is made good, then Paul will rise from the dead to life everlasting. So Paul is setting everything else aside for the sake of that claim, "I press on to make it [the resurrection] my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own" (Phil. 3:12). He has not yet gotten there, so he still strives, "Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own," but he is single-minded because "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead. I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14). That upward call of

resurrection is worth enough that Paul can count the prior things in his life as written off and over. He considers only what is in front of him. He is a runner who has had a bad start to the race but now as the race nears its end, he sees the prize in front him, the tape intact, untouched before by anyone else. He cannot look behind or to the right or the left, lest he lose the prize. He cannot beat himself up for mistakes he made at the race's start, how he stumbled or how his shoes weren't tightly tied or how he fumbled the handoff. Instead he must press on.

The reason Paul wants us in this way to "join in imitating him" (Phil. 3:17) is because we are not alone in this race, in this striving, in this determined pressing on toward resurrection. We share this direction of life in life with Paul and with "those who walk according to the example you have in us," those fellow Christians who share the same goal with you. You are not a Lone Ranger of Christ, setting out upon your sturdy horse all by yourself to find Jesus, and the Lone Ranger had a faithful sidekick anyway. You are destined for life and striving toward the resurrection of life with Paul and with all the saints down through the ages and the saints now sitting in your pews or in your chancels, now sitting next to you in this convention, now spread throughout the nation and through the world. You strive together with them for a resurrection to life everlasting where the numbers will be beyond our counting.

It is true that not all in the church strive in this way. Some preach Christ from envy (Phil. 1:15), and their god in life is their bellies or public opinion or self-regard or whatever other idols they have set up for themselves. Paul knew this as well as you do, and said that their end, their goal, their destination would be "destruction," awakening to judgment rather than to life on the Last Day. It is not yours to worry and to fret and to obsess over those who work against Christ's teaching and His way of life. Instead, press on! You strive for life and do not look behind you or to the side. Press on!

*What did not have to change in Paul?*

If Paul's understanding of Scripture and doctrine, his sense of what God's gifts were for, and his sense of direction and purpose in life all had to change for him to be useful on Christ's mission, was there anything left unchanged? Indeed, much in every way, and the continuities between Paul before his conversion and Paul after his conversion are tremendously helpful to us in understanding where and when change is needful for us to be more useful instruments of the Master for His purposes of man's salvation and His own eternal glory.

*1. His personality (2 Thess. 3:6-12)*

Since Paul wrote letters, his personality is before us all the time, not because it was part of his gospel but because personality is inevitably part of someone's writing and preaching. We know more about his personality than perhaps anyone else's, even Jesus's, because his words come to us in the first-person without a mediator like the evangelists. We can see how little his personality changed even as so much else did.

Paul reprimanded the idleness of some in the Thessalonian congregation who were not supporting themselves and in their idleness had ample time to stir up trouble about the congregation members (2 Thess. 3:11). Idleness tracks with wickedness so that where one is, the other also will be. Paul is the opposite of idle, working as he reminds the Thessalonians about his beginnings with them, "night and day" (2 Thess. 3:8) so that his presence would not be a financial burden to the burgeoning congregation in Macedonia. He would work however much was necessary to support himself in order for the gospel to proceed freely through Thessalonica. His dedication to his work and self-support is the measure of their freedom, free in the gospel

through Paul's preaching and free from financial burdens through Paul's self-supporting work (2 Thess. 3:9).

Paul was no less diligent before his conversion. Luke pays attention to Saul's presence at the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:58-8:1) to foreshadow the later shocking conversion of the same man who like his namesake was found "among the baggage" (1 Sam. 10:22, Acts 7:58) before he came into his divinely ordained role, the first Saul as king of Israel, the second Saul as apostle to the Gentiles. Notable, though, was the second Saul's intense diligence in persecution. He not only persecuted the Gentiles within the politically easy confines of Jerusalem and its suburbs. He went to the length of securing letters (Acts 9:1) to bear to the Jewish officials in Damascus that would ensure the successful persecution of any nascent Christian congregations in that city.

The point is that whether for good or for ill, Paul's personality was energetic and assiduous. He always pursued his goal with intense concentration and unerring focus. He did not wander off or make exceptions. If Christianity were evil, then he would ruthlessly stamp it out, even seizing and killing women. If Christianity were good and true, then he would tirelessly spread its message to the farthest and unlikeliest corners of the world he knew. God did not take Saul captive to Christ's purposes and then give him a personality. God made Saul with a personality and then made him captive to Christ's purposes, using that fearless diligence for godliness rather than ungodliness.

## 2. *His ethnicity (Acts 21:39-22:5)*

For how Paul describes what many modern Americans would call his "background," I will use the term "ethnicity" because the modern term "race" is too broad for the distinctions Paul makes and for the point of the Jew-Gentile distinction that was crucial to Paul's life and

ministry both before and after his conversion on the road to Damascus. “Race” denotes very high-level, very broad differences, often categorized continentally, as Africans or Asians or Europeans. “Ethnicity” exists on a smaller scale, where the root of the Greek word for “nation” is found, but for which we could almost use the term “tribe,” a relatively small group of people with a shared genealogy and culture of some kind, usually speaking the same language. Paul’s own Jewish ethnicity was by his time and long before his time multilingual as a result of the Exile and then the Jewish diaspora’s growth under the Persian and Roman Empires. But whether before or after his conversion, Paul can describe himself with certainty and with pride as an Israelite of Israelites, a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Benjaminite of Benjaminites, with all the customs and knowledge attendant upon this ethnic heritage which was also his religious heritage.

How was Paul’s ethnicity unchanging and important to his ministry in the name of Christ? One cannot change his own genealogy, but one can choose what to do with it. Although Paul’s ethnicity did not change, his sense of its relative theological importance and of its usefulness for the accomplishment of the Messiah’s mission did change. That is, Paul did not seek in his own life or broadly in the life of the Roman Empire something like what is now called “racial reconciliation.” He located reconciliation between hostile people-groups in the death of Jesus (Eph. 2:11-22), but the application of that Christ-accomplished reconciliation would be through the preaching of the gospel of Christ to every ethnicity, not through the amalgamation of all ethnicities or the extinguishment of Paul’s own ethnic existence in the course of the gospel’s spread beyond his own ethnicity to the various ethnicities of the ancient eastern Mediterranean world.

Paul’s ethnicity was both gift and burden, in accordance with his teaching on original sin. What he had inherited was both good and evil simultaneously, as one’s genealogy is. Our Lord’s



own genealogy included great men of faith such as Abraham (Matt. 1:2) and great remembered sins such as the adultery of David with Bathsheba (Matt. 1:6). Paul's account of his genealogy is no different. On the one hand, he is very conscious of his ethnicity, being more Hebraic than any other Hebrews, having advanced beyond many others of similar age in his devotion to the traditions of his fathers (Gal. 1:14). On the other hand, he is very conscious that his ethnicity is no assurance of salvation, even though he belongs to the nation to which were committed the oracles and promises of God, given to Israel as to no other nation upon earth (Rom. 3:2).

When on trial before his coethnics, Paul is clear about the divisions, confusions, and possibilities among Jews in his time. We will look first at his defense before an audience undoubtedly sharing ethnicity with him before looking at how he described his ethnicity and its importance to Christian audiences that were ethnically mixed to one degree or another.

Paul's Jerusalem trial was precipitated by the machinations of Jews from Asia Minor (Acts 21:27). They stirred up the crowds in Jerusalem to oppose Paul and seek his death through addressing the Jewish crowds as "men of Israel" (Acts 21:28), an ethnic term that made no specific political sense. There was then no polity called "Israel," so that this appeal must be an appeal to a name and a state that did not then exist. Notice that throughout the New Testament "Israel" and "Israelite" are terms that Jews use only for, with, and about each other, except for the rare instances in which Paul transfers the term from intra-Jewish names to naming the Christian church including Gentiles (Rom. 11:26, Gal. 6:16). When Jews are speaking to a group that could include Gentiles or when Gentiles are speaking of Jews, the terms "Judea" and "Jew" are used. "Israel" is an in-group word about a place and a group that exist only potentially as a group. Ethnicity can include not only one's actual genealogy, heredity, language, culture, or

religion but also what a group or someone within a group *would like* the genealogy, heredity, language, culture, or religion to be.

Paul was at first misidentified as an Egyptian, perhaps because of his knowledge of Greek. This may not be a misattribution of Paul's ethnicity so much as his geographic origin; the tribune in Acts 21 is effectively asking, "Are you an Egyptian Jew?" which is why Paul answers with the affirmation that he is a Jew not from the African coast but "from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city" (Acts 21:39). His account of his conversion and his Jewish bonafides is uncontroversial until he recounts the divine commission sending him to the Gentiles. The problem is not that Paul is insufficiently Jewish but that he is insufficiently committed to a Jewishness that will have nothing to do with non-Jews. When he announces that the God of their fathers had commissioned him to bear the divine Name to and upon the Gentiles, he is denounced and pronounced as unworthy of further living. The death penalty seems fitting for someone who is committing open blasphemy in associating the God of Israel with the Gentiles (Acts 22:22).

After the poor outcome of Paul's public speech, he was brought before the Sanhedrin, the same local governing body that had previously forbidden the apostles to speak or teach anymore in the name of Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 5:28). The tribune's curiosity about the justice of the accusations against Paul will be satisfied only in seeing Paul tried before the highest court of his nation, his *ethnos*. Paul's defense there is notably more hostile than his address to the public, perhaps because so much more is obviously at stake – Paul's life like his Lord's could have been on the line. He denounces the high priest Ananias as a "whitewashed wall" (Acts 23:3) echoing Jesus's critique of the Pharisees as "whitewashed tombs" (Matt. 23:27), but when reproached for speaking ill of the high priest, Paul apologizes for his speaking ill of the "a ruler of your people,"

that is, he accepts the reality of Ananias's authority while denouncing Ananias's opposition to the gospel (Acts 23:5).

Paul will also exploit the theological or (in more philosophically neutral terminology) ideological divisions among his own ethnicity. His perception that the Sanhedrin was politically divided between Sadducees and Pharisees became his conviction that he should split the council's decision-making by an appeal to the faction that agreed with him on the reality of the resurrection. His strong affirmation of the resurrection secures the political support of the Pharisees and then dissension among the council-members themselves (Acts 23:6, 9), a disagreement that tips into violence and moves the tribune to remove Paul from a potentially life-threatening uproar.

The ensuing plot to kill Paul will necessitate Paul's transfer to the governor's custody at Caesarea Maritima, a Gentile city and the seat of Roman government in Judea where he will be safe from mobs and conspiracies of his own people. Paul inhabits a world largely incomprehensible to the ethnicities around him – Romans, whatever ethnicity the tribune was (possibly Syrian) – so Jewish are the apostle's personal and historical reference points. One cannot imagine Paul's making a similarly historically and theologically informed argument about the differences between devotees of mystery religions and devotees of ancestral household gods before an audience of Romans. Even after his conversion, Paul remains Jewish and remains convinced that the true end-point of his ethnicity's hopes has been found in the resurrected Jesus of Nazareth. Although it was the particular blessing of God to his people that they lived in expectation of the Messiah, it is the blessing of God to all peoples of the earth that the Messiah is risen from the dead so that Jew and Gentile may hope in Him.

*Phil. 3:1-11*

The Messiah's blessing is not contingent upon ethnicity. Jewishness or non-Jewishness are not the gospel. Paul took no recorded position on the political situation of his own people within the Roman Empire, made no triumphant pronouncements about social justice for Jews nor about the Jewish requirement to abide by every jot and tittle of Roman government, and authored no manifestoes for or against the Roman emperor. Paul's indifference to political questions mirrors Jesus's indifference, where their most savage language is reserved for misinterpretations of Scripture, not for political missteps or political favorites. The heat of political controversy surrounds Jesus and Paul, but they are untouched by its enticements. They move through a world rife with conspiracies, rebellions, and oppressions, but one would scarcely know those things from their own words and actions, wherein the constant concern is the glorification of the God of Israel before the face of all peoples.

This indifference to ethnicity and its attendant political involvements is a definite point of discontinuity between Paul before his conversion and after his conversion. Paul's seeking to destroy the lives of Christian men and women before his conversion sprang from his conviction that they were an existential threat to his people. Existential threats do not receive trials; they are simply killed. What the crowd in Jerusalem wanted for Paul after he announced his divine commission to take God's Name to the Gentiles was what Paul had once himself wanted for anyone who bore the Name of Jesus – instant death for traitors to their people. Ethnicity's political claims were so strong that they could overrule all other considerations and any sense of legal due process for Jewish or Roman courts. Ethnicity's political claims could override all else in the name of securing the continued political existence of the nation.

“Confidence in the flesh” is how Paul designates a pride in ethnicity that elevates it to theological significance (Phil. 3:4). Paul's one-time conviction that being Jewish would avail for

righteousness was what Christ overturned on the road to Damascus along with Paul's convictions about who the Messiah would be and how he would be when he appeared. People of Paul's own ethnicity are called "dogs" and "mutilators of the flesh" precisely because they maintain the confidence in Jewishness that Paul himself once had (Phil. 3:2). His genealogy and commitment to Pharisaism merit greater confidence for him than for his opponents in the flesh, but the flesh, the source of all merely human opinion, desire, and conviction, will not avail before God on the last day.

Now the connection between Paul's firm doctrine of justification by faith and his indifference to ethnicity, even his own, is plainly visible. If one's flesh, including one's ethnicity, is insufficient grounds for any kind of confidence before God, then all the actions, thoughts, and passions of the flesh's confidence are damnable, too. Paul can describe them in an indelicate word for what gets thrown out the back door as "rubbish" (Phil. 3:8) because such misplaced confidence is as much worth keeping around as dirty diapers or used cooking grease. Its only purpose when the end comes is to be cast out.

Justification turned out to be in Christ and through Christ, not in Jewishness or through Jewishness. The cultivation of ethnic particularity meant at best nothing and at worst was hostile to the working of God and growth of His Name and His kingdom through Christ. Thinking himself righteous, Paul proved to be a fool and was blinded for a time so that he could learn to trust in God and not in the flesh, which is a poor companion at death, whether for Jew or for Gentile. The flesh's capacity to save you and to raise your body from the dead is its total worth, and since that capacity is nonexistent, its worth is nonexistent. Ethnicity is real and enduring. Paul never became anything other than a Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia, but his ethnicity was not usually helpful and indeed may have been actively more difficult for his mission to the Gentiles

than if he had been a Gentile himself. As a Jew, he was particularly offensive to fellow Jews who saw him as a traitor, and as a Jew, he was more alien to Gentiles than if he had been one of them. God worked through Paul not because of Paul's ethnicity but as it were, practically in spite of his ethnicity and his former convictions about its theological significance.

How does that apply to our own day? Ethnicity specifically is sometimes of great importance to churches in the contemporary United States, especially in immigrant communities where being Oromo rather than Amhara may matter a great deal to the pastor or for the pastor. Race more generally has great significance for church communities, who seem sociologically conceived to stick together, whites with whites, blacks with blacks, Asians with Asians, Hispanics with Hispanics. I do not observe these things to praise them or to condemn them. I observe them for the sake of the mission. I cannot sort out long-term hostilities between Oromo and other people-groups from the Horn of Africa, all of which we now have up and down the East Coast as well as in other parts of the U.S. Paul could not and did not resolve the political and ethnic hostilities between Jews and Romans in Judea or in the diaspora, but the gospel cannot be limited by these hostilities. The gospel call goes out to Jew and Gentile, to Oromo and Amhara, and gathers them into congregations, some being more Jewish than Gentile or more Gentile than Jewish in ethnic composition.

Paul did not, for example, browbeat the Judean churches for their hostility to Gentiles, politically obvious as it was. Are we sure there was nothing merely fleshly, merely political, about the insistence by "some men from James" that Gentiles also had to be circumcised? But Paul did not address the theological problem of Jewish hostility to Gentiles with political accusations about Jewish pride and its foolishness in the Roman Empire. He did not even attack circumcision as a cultural practice but solely as an attack on the gospel when it was required to

be in Christ. Since justification is by faith in Christ, it could not be by circumcision.

Circumcision could be done and was done by Paul to Timothy for the sake of acceptance within a circumcised community of Jews. Many things can be done in order to become a “Jew to the Jews, a Greek to the Greeks,” (see 1 Cor. 9:20), but nothing can be done cross-culturally, cross-ethnically, or cross-racially in order to justify anyone through confidence in his culture, his ethnicity, or his race, as if those things availed before God.

This is especially important to recall in the United States because our mission field is at once so demographically large and diverse. Our focus should not be on browbeating anyone in the church for his inability to understand completely new and foreign cultures, whether he is a recent Ethiopian immigrant to Hoboken or a white lifelong resident of Cape May. No one is born with an excellent sensitivity to how other people are outside his in-group, and much rhetoric around mission in the United States presumes that Eritreans or Nicaraguans will know better how to reach a fifth- or twelfth-generation white American better than another white American. The United States has always been a mission field, and the field has gotten more ethnically and racially diverse since 1965. We all need help to reach the parts of the mission field that we and our congregations are best equipped and best placed to reach.

In this way much discussion about “racial reconciliation” in American churches is an aping of political rhetoric from the media’s talking points about the evils of American whites. This is not only a political judgment and a historical judgment that is not part of the church’s mission. Paul provided no judgments about the fate of the Hasmonean dynasty that had lost Judea to the Romans in 63 B.C. through its internecine feuding, and his political judgments would not convert a single person to Jesus. If we browbeat white people also within the church, we should be unsurprised when they do not come to church, and since whites are likely the least

churchgoing or church-belonging racial group in the United States, our concern should be to get them into the church, repent of their sin and believe the gospel, rather than making the church yet another venue in modern life where whites can be uniquely castigated and other ethnic groups and races – lumped together for this purpose as “people of color” – can be told how wonderful they are. This is an unbiblical understanding of original sin, something all people inherit and express through actual sin – not something done by “whites” sometime in American history – and it hinders the gospel from going forth throughout our nation, even to some of the demographically whitest parts of the United States such as New England or West Virginia, where we have, relatively speaking, very, very little Lutheran presence. Consistency of rhetoric and focus would demand that we similarly denounce the expansion of the Oromo into political power and territorial occupation throughout Ethiopian history or Brahmin caste prejudice in Indian immigrant communities. All people-groups need the gospel of Christ, so we dare not take on political convictions that would hinder the spread of that gospel, as did the Judean churches who proved to be politically and ethnically demanding of all other churches but fruitless in carrying out the task of the Great Commission.

### *Conclusion*

The Word of the Lord spreads through the preaching of the gospel. In our time there will be perhaps greater obstacles than the churches of the United States have ever before faced in our nation’s history. This should cheer us because our God is a mighty Fortress and will prove Himself a strong tower and a rock in this time of spiritual war. We flee to Him as a strong tower and find refuge in the shadow of His wings. We have nothing to fear. We are and can be and shall be intrepid in the proclamation of His gospel to any and every people-group in our neighborhoods, in our cities, in our small towns, and throughout our nation. We have no other



commission. We have not been commissioned to be complacent as were some of the apostles who hung around in Jerusalem quite a long time. We have not been commissioned to be politically fractious and constantly demanding as were the Judean churches in Acts with their claims about the need to become as Jewish as they were. We have not been commissioned to ignorance of doctrine in the name of mission since the doctrine of Christ drives the mission of Christ – what we preach and teach is what the mission is all about.

We have been commissioned by Christ to speak with power and boldness, as Paul did anywhere he traveled and when up against whatever obstacle he faced. We were given a Spirit of power in our baptism that energizes us to proclaim with boldness that all people-groups, however long they have been in our neighborhoods, are solely and entirely composed of sinners dead in their trespasses until Christ claims them as His own through His gospel. He will equip us for this proclamation as He protected the ship Paul was carried captive on from sinking, so that His servant could proclaim His mighty Name also in Rome. We do not know what the future will bring, but we know that the main character all along the way will be the Lord's Word and the growth of His kingdom will have no end.