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Chapter 1 **PUTTING FIRST THINGS FIRST** Acts 1:1- 26

Too many Christians try to do something before they really know what they should be doing! Take writing this book as an example. Over a year ago I felt that I wanted to write another book. Thirteen chapters were written down, and typed out by my secretary. A rough outline and two specimen chapters were sent to the editor for his views. After a month his reply came back: "I don't think you are sure to whom you are actually writing." I was not very excited about that!

Deep down I knew he was right. I had had the general idea of a subject, but I had not taken the time or trouble to pray and carefully plan the specific goal and way of accomplishing it. Like so often in my life, I had acted before I really knew what to do.

Dare I suggest that a great deal of Christian activity is carried out on the basis of 'ideas' rather than 'inspiration'? Somebody in a church draws attention to the need of teenagers in the local town. "We must do something to reach these youngsters with the gospel". One or two well-intentioned folk agree and decide to open the church hall every Friday for games such as snooker, table tennis and darts. A 'Jesus-spot' is put in for good measure.

The first Friday the six church teenagers are joined by six others who are 'fished' in off the streets by a leader who saw them drinking cans of something while seated on a low wall in the town centre. The evening passes off well except for one incident of cigarette ash burning the green baize on the snooker table and a near-fight over who was playing who at table tennis. Apparently one of the new lads did not have enough patience to wait for young Martin to have a turn - although everyone in the church would have known that allowances have to be made for Martin. After all, he is Martin - a bit slower than all the others.

It must have been good, on the whole, because the following week twenty-one teenagers come. The language is bad and the leaders hope the deaconess upstairs arranging the

flowers for Sunday won't be offended. Two of the church teenagers have not come, a third says it's because of the rough crowd.

During the 'Jesus-spot' a sudden plague of bladder infections seems to erupt and 50 per cent have to visit the toilet. The leaders think they are encouraged, but they are not sure.

After a month they really wonder if they have done the right thing. The ladies prayer meeting is rejoicing in the 50 teenagers who come every Friday, but none of them has ever actually seen what goes on at the meeting. A dubious video was smuggled into the quiet room. It certainly kept the courting couples quiet for an hour, but it did not teach them anything about Christian friendship and marriage. Only one of the church teenagers comes now.

Unfortunately he has started smoking just recently. The man coming to talk to the group did not show up for some reason. Perhaps it was just as well because the group resent the 'Jesus-spot' which they say interrupts their games. The well-meaning team who have found themselves caught up in these events now begin to realise, too late, that to do something before you really know what to do is an invitation to disaster.

The early Christians had a general idea as to their collective purpose. Jesus had said to them: "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. 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." Luke 24:46-49. They had to be witnesses for Jesus. But how? When? Where? They did not know.

We will do well to learn from these men and women. If we want to be used by God as a fellowship of Christians, we must follow their basic priorities:

1. Obedience to Jesus' commands. One word jumps out of Jesus' command in Luke 24:49, the word "stay". What a thing to say to people about to embark on a mission which will

revolutionise the world. The Greek literally means 'to sit down'. The way to begin to go into all the world and preach the gospel of Jesus Christ is to sit at the feet of Jesus. 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." Acts 1:4. Peter, John, James, Andrew and the others were to "wait", or to await a particular event, detailed in our next chapter. Their priority now was obedience. To move ahead with other work would be wrong when the Master had said 'sit down and wait for me to move first'. We are often too activity orientated. We confuse waiting with doing nothing. Those Christians in Jerusalem obediently did what Jesus told them to.

"Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city." Acts 1:12.

2. Prayer together. It appears that a group of 120 believers were present in the upstairs room in Jerusalem where the embryonic church was meeting. The eleven remaining disciples are named (Judas had committed suicide after betraying the Lord Jesus) and so is Mary, Jesus' mother. Verse 14 begins by telling us their main activity: "They all joined together constantly in prayer..."

To pray is to 'prosecute'. The original New Testament word used here for 'prayer' has the same root as the English 'to prosecute'. The latter is defined as 'to carry out some pursuit or plan'. So we have arrived at the heart of this first lesson. Pray before you begin the work. See prayer as the first stage of your work. These disciples were engaged in their commission of reaching the world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ as they prayed together in that room in Jerusalem.

There are three very important factors in this prayer meeting. God was able to do all we read of in Acts, through these people, because these factors were evident in their prayer meeting.

(i) Involvement. Everybody who wanted to be involved in God's work was there. This included the apostles who had been called by Jesus to leave their jobs and learn his will for their lives. It included the women like Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and others who had been first to discover that the crucified Christ was alive. Jesus' mother and brothers were also at the prayer meeting. His family, friends and followers were all there because they wanted to be involved in whatever was going to happen next. They did not really know what that might be, but they had decided to be involved whatever it was. They wanted to be where God was working and so they were at the prayer meeting.

If we let our minds run back over the gospel narrative we can also remember some who were not at this meeting. There had been early followers who had turned back from following Jesus because the cost, financially or to their family, or to their own ambitions, was too great. There was also a large number of religious people who had chosen not to follow Jesus at all. Neither group was involved in this prayer meeting, but the ones who were there were the ones who counted.

(ii) Unity. The recent past was over and gone. The women did not say to the apostles, "we told you Jesus is alive and you didn't believe us!" Nobody accused Peter, "it was only a few days ago and you denied you ever knew Jesus in front of a crowd of witnesses". The assembled folk knew these things were true, but they decided that it did not matter now. The past was not as important as the present and the future.

The Authorised Version says, "These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication ..." Acts 1:14. The men and women were of the same mind. Several times this phrase "one accord" is used about the early church at prayer and in service. It is translated "together" or "all agreed".

"to meet together in the temple courts" Acts 2:46

"raised their voices together in prayer to God" Acts 4:24

"to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade" Acts 5:12

"so we all agreed to choose some men" Acts 15:25

Dynamic service is primed for action when a group of Christians, who are of the same mind, pray together to know God's will and to be involved in God's work. Ephesians 4 teaches that unity is both given to the church to be protected by her members, verse 3, and the goal of the church to be pursued by her members, verse 13.

I have attended prayer meetings where the conversation afterwards has included criticism of those who have not been bothered to attend. Perhaps the prayer meeting is better off without people who do not see prayer as the priority in the Lord's work. But don't let those who do pray become guilty of breaking the given unity by becoming highly critical of those who don't.

(iii) Persistence. It appears from the phrase at the beginning of verse 15 "In those days" that this prayer meeting was no one-evening-wonder! The Christians were "constantly in prayer" 1:14 (NIV), they "continued in prayer" (AV), they "devoted themselves to prayer" (J.B. Phillips and RSV). Luke intends us to learn that the early church was strong and persevering in its commitment to prayer. He uses the same phrase three times in the first two chapters of Acts. Perhaps it expresses the three strong priorities of the church as he saw them: prayer Acts 1:14, the apostles' teaching 2:42 and meetings in the temple with other believers 2:46. (We'll see the value of meetings in chapter 3).

When I was younger I remember watching Ron Clarke of Australia running lap after lap of long distance races. He was sometimes dubbed 'the machine' because of the consistent timings of each lap in a twelve or sixteen lap race. Some folk may prefer to watch a ten-second hundred metres sprint, but I admire any athlete who can persevere to achieve a long distance goal.

Many Christians are better at the short sprint prayer times than the endurance marathons.

Yet God calls us to be continually strong towards Him in prayer. He is consistent in His

dealings with men. Moses had years in the Midian desert as a shepherd before God allowed him to lead the Israelites. Paul had a probable three and a half years in Arabia before God used Barnabas to bring him into active service at Antioch. Our Lord Jesus spent a specific forty days in the wilderness before he began to preach around Galilee. Don't fight against a time of prayerful preparation. When you know what you should be doing, then you can do it with all your God-given might.

Discussion questions

- * *What is prayer? Describe it in your own words.*
- * *Share ideas on making an individual's prayer time more vital.*
- * *What can be done to help people enjoy a prayer meeting and recommend it to others?*

Make practical suggestions on the time

the venue

the content

the format

Chapter 2 TAKING ALL THE HELP YOU CAN GET Acts 2:1- 21

One of the most exciting things about being involved in God's work is that we know the work is not our own. The ultimate responsibility is His, not ours. This immediately lifts the limits and enlarges the vision. We may only be able to do a little, but God can do so very much more.

The apostle Paul realised this the more his ministry went on. From the restriction of his own Roman imprisonment he wrote to the Ephesians:

"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." Ephesians 3 verses 20 and 21.

If it is God's work in which we are participating, remember that He is able to do immeasurably (Greek: HUPEREKPERISSOU, made up of three words meaning 'over', 'from', and 'abundant' or 'superabundantly') more than all we ask or imagine (Greek: NOEO meaning to 'perceive' or to 'understand'). God's power working in us and through us will take us beyond our small goals, it will expand our limited horizons, it will improve on even our greatest dreams.

Jesus said to his disciples, just prior to his ascension, "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about." Acts 1:4. This gift was the Holy Spirit with whom they were to be baptised, verse 5.

In almost any growing church there will be controversy about the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps this is why Paul exhorted Christians to "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." Ephesians 4:3. Without the Holy Spirit there can be no real work of God. The Bible is full of reminders of the valuable ministries of the Holy Spirit.

He will teach us the lessons Jesus taught his disciples, John 14:26. He will also counsel us as Jesus counselled his disciples. The Holy Spirit will bring dynamic power to any Christian seeking to be a true witness for Jesus Christ, Acts 1:8. He will give boldness beyond normal human ability or personality, even in times of adversity,

Acts 4:31. The Holy Spirit will give comfort and encouragement to Christians living in the fear of the Lord, Acts 9:31. He will come alongside such individuals and congregations. He will enable heartfelt praise to God, Acts 10:44-46. He will give prophecy, Acts 11:28 and 21:11.

The Holy Spirit will lead the church in strategy for missions and in selecting people to do particular tasks, Acts 13:2. He will help the church decide matters of doctrine and practice, Acts 15:28, during times of honest testimony and dispute. Matthew Henry makes an interesting comment on Acts 19:6 which records Paul laying hands on twelve men from Ephesus who spoke in tongues and prophesied as the Holy Spirit came upon them.

"They had the Spirit of prophecy, that they might understand the mysteries of the kingdom of God themselves, and the gift of tongues, that they might preach them to every nation and language." Paul was to write later to the church at Ephesus praising God for giving them "every spiritual blessing in Christ" and urging them to continually "be filled with the Holy Spirit", Ephesians 1:3 and 5:18.

It is precisely because the Holy Spirit does so much for any Christian work that the evil one tries, and succeeds, in creating controversy. He will try to make us "grieve the Holy Spirit" if he can, Ephesians 4:30. He must not be allowed to succeed.

In my experience the most common causes of this conflict are three. Many Christians are ignorant of what the Bible actually teaches. We are not the same as those Ephesians Paul met, who had never heard of the Holy Spirit. We remain ignorant because we only know part of the truth. Some churches take a very strong line: "the Holy Spirit and his gifts ceased to be significant since the Bible was written and accepted as the word of God". "The baptism of the Holy Spirit was a once for all event on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2". Other churches take equally strong but different views: "If you cannot speak in tongues you are not filled with the Holy Spirit". "If you are not filled with the Holy Spirit this way you are not a real Christian, or at best you are a second-rate Christian".

Now, any growing church is going to have some people who have been influenced by either of these views at previous churches, or at special festivals and conventions, or through teaching cassettes and books. I often find myself sharing the counter-balancing truth with people from the different persuasions. Partial knowledge, or partial ignorance if you prefer, is a cause of conflict. Paul warns the Corinthians "Now, about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant," 1 Corinthians 12:1.

Another frequent cause of conflict is that many Christians insist that what has happened in their experience must happen in the lives of every other Christian. It is interesting that what

happened to Peter on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2:4, was somewhat similarly repeated in his own ministry to Cornelius' household in Acts 10:44-46. Philip, however, who was probably also present at Pentecost, Acts 1:13, did not see the same experience in Samaria. Peter and John's arrival to lay hands on the new Samaritan believers brought in a different way of receiving the Holy Spirit, Acts 8:17. Paul received the Holy Spirit in Acts 9:17 when Ananias laid hands on him, and used this same 'method' with the Ephesians, Acts 19:6. I would like to insist that there is variety in God's dealings with his children!

On a summer's day in Cornwall, where I live, many people flock to the beautiful beaches. The Atlantic Ocean on the north coast at Portreath is inviting to swim and to surf. I don't go in very often these days (too old, or too lazy, or both?) but watching those who do highlights this lesson. There are some folk who strip off, run straight down the beach into the sea, and never stopping, keep going forward until they cannot lift their legs high enough to be out of the water, and they swim. It has taken fifteen seconds. There are others who get ready to swim but only paddle for half an hour gradually getting the water further and further up their legs. When it touches their tummies there is sometimes a little 'yelp' of delighted panic. After a further few minutes their feet are off the sand and they are swimming. Of course there are all sorts of other 'in betweens' in this story. There are the hardy souls who dive off the harbour wall. Others on the edge of the sea resent being splashed by those already in, or plunging past. A few, with rolled up trouser legs show no intention of going any further! And of course, tragically, hardly a season goes by without somebody drowning, and dozens needing to be rescued from their own foolishness. Is the parallel with being filled with the Holy Spirit not obvious?

The third cause of conflict follows on from this wrong presumption that everyone's experience must be the same. Many Christians are insensitive to what God is doing in the lives of others. Someone may not speak in tongues, but it is noticeable that their language has changed and

they are showing more Christian desires than worldly ways. Another person may not have memorised Berkhof's 'Systematic Theology', and certainly has not heard of "the derivation of the canon and applied tests for canonicity round about AD367". But he reads his Bible and seeks to put it into practice - even if he does go overboard with a holy kiss! New Christians are like new plants. They need a lot of special care and protection before they can stand the wild weather conditions of life. Signs of life need to be encouraged and pruning into shape will come later, at the right season.

What can we learn from Acts 2 about the Holy Spirit and the Christian? Perhaps the most striking part of the story is highlighted by comparing the disciples before and after their Pentecost experience. John 20:19 says: "On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said: 'Peace be with you'". These same disciples are described in Acts 2:1-14 as bearing witness publicly in Jerusalem's market place. The crowd was over three thousand strong and included people from many different countries, some of whom were purely pouring scorn on the disciples and their witnessing. The same disciples who were afraid for their own lives before Pentecost were on fire for the Lord - regardless of themselves - after having been filled with the Holy Spirit.

This account in Acts 2 is one of five in Acts which all describe the same event. In Acts 1:4 and 5 Jesus says "... wait for the gift my Father promised...you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit." In 1:8 he continues "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you..." In Acts 2:4 Luke records "...they were all filled with the Holy Spirit..." In Acts 2:17 Peter applies the prophet Joel's description "...God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people". In Acts 10:47 Peter says that Cornelius has "...received the Holy Spirit just as we have." The event is narrated by Luke in verse 44 "while Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message". Peter's own testimony bears this out in Acts

11:15-17 "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 baptised with water, but you will be baptised 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?"

Pentecost is described in at least five ways: (1) the disciples being baptised with the Holy Spirit, (2) the Holy Spirit coming upon the disciples, (3) the disciples being filled with the Holy Spirit, (4) God pouring out His Holy Spirit, and (5) God giving a gift to the disciples. We must make sure we do not fall out with other Christians over mere terminology. The evidences for the Holy Spirit's presence will be many and varied as He changes us into the likeness of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will give assurance that we are God's children, Romans 8:16. He will help us get rid of the old way of life, Romans 8:13 and 14. He will reveal to us what God intends for us, 1 Corinthians 2:9 and 10. He will teach us spiritual truths, 1 Corinthians 2:13. He will give to each individual some manifestation (something that will open up or make clear Christianity) for the benefit of all Christians around him,

1 Corinthians 12:7. He will give gifts, 1 Corinthians 12:4, and produce fruit, Galatians 5:22 and 23. Don't insist that others have the same experiences as you. Let God the Holy Spirit help them in ways He chooses to. And don't be insensitive to what the Counsellor is teaching the church together. In the church every person needs to show the difference life in the Holy Spirit makes to him or herself.

The petrol driven engine needs to be cleaned and serviced to achieve maximum performance. If the spark plug gaps are too big power is lost. If dirt is allowed to build up in the moving parts balance is lost and a rather rough ride will result. If no fuel is put into the tank the engine will sooner or later fail completely. Let us allow God to tune the engines of our own lives and churches. Make sure no sin quenches the power. Regularly take time out from life's journey to visit the source of all supplies. The same petrol powers a basic Nissan

Sunny and a luxurious Rolls Royce. God the Holy Spirit can, and will, do way beyond our greatest imaginations if we acknowledge it is His work we are engaged in and not ours. We must individually be what He wants us to be. The Holy Spirit will help us do what He wants us to do, but He will not help us do anything we may want to do as an alternative.

Discussion questions

* *What jobs does the Bible teach that the Holy Spirit does?*

* *Is there a "one and only" pattern for the work of the Holy Spirit?*

If yes, what is it?

If no, what guidelines are there?

* *Why does enthusiasm about the Holy Spirit sometimes make other people feel inferior?*

Where does enthusiasm end and sensitivity begin?

Chapter 3 **MEETINGS AND MORE MEETINGS** Acts 2:42- 47

I recently worked out the number of meetings the averagely committed person would attend in our church during one year. Every week there would be three Sunday services, a prayer meeting and Bible study mid-week or a home fellowship. If he or she was in the leadership team for one of the departments - youth, witness, music or eldership, that would mean at least one more meeting a week, maybe two. Totting up the number over a year, the staggering total is revealed, 312. Not many days left over are there? And that figure does not include any 'one off' meetings or special events!

Why do we have so many meetings? Perhaps an even more basic question would be, why do we meet at all? There are several dangerous myths that have developed in Christian circles about meetings. Have you heard the one that says "the more meetings you attend the more spiritual you are"? A variation is "if he doesn't go to the prayer meeting every week, he can't be spiritual enough to be a Sunday School teacher". This is a serious problem in many

churches because we have subconsciously been schooled to 'judge' spirituality by outward appearances. Jesus Christ had some very hard words for the people he met who did that exact thing: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like white-washed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness." Matthew 23:27 and 28.

The skeleton of a church may be its programme, its structure of meetings and activities, but the life of that church is not automatically shown by 100 per cent slavish commitment to that skeleton. The life is in the Spirit, the movement, the action, the heartbeat, the flesh and blood of born again people.

Studying Acts we can easily see that the early Christians did have meetings and, what's more, they had lots of them. Meetings themselves are not 'evil' as some believe! We have already seen that the first thing the early church did when Jesus had ascended into heaven was to meet together in Jerusalem's upper room, Acts 1:13 and 14. Also we have noted in Acts 2:1 the disciples were all together in one place. After Pentecost, more than 3000 people joined the new church, and we are told in Acts 2:42-47 what they did. Two phrases demand our attention at this point. In verse 44 "all the believers were together". The meaning is that they were all for the same things. They all wanted teaching. They all needed fellowship. They all desired to break bread, to pray, and to share together. Their common interest, common needs and common purpose made it convenient for them to be together. Hence verse 46 "every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread and ate together..." Those of the same mind met for their mutual benefit.

Just like anyone born again today, these early believers were being called out from a normal life in the world. It was reading Watchman Nee that helped me to see that the other side of

separating ourselves from the world is joining the church. When people are born again out of life in the world, they are born into the family of the church. They are given to other Christians on trust for the Lord, and other Christians are given to them as a gift from the Lord to protect, encourage, feed and develop into maturity.

Just from reading the book of Acts we can see many reasons for the early Christian meetings. In Acts 3:1 there were set times for praying together. In Acts 4:24 there was a prayer meeting called to pray protection on those who were being hounded by the authorities. It was also a time of testimony and another occasion when they were filled together with the Holy Spirit. In Acts 5:12 we read that "...all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade." From the immediate context it would seem to show that this meeting included the receiving of gifts like those recorded from Joseph Barnabas, and the deceitful Ananias and Sapphira. These gifts were stewarded faithfully to meet seen needs among other believers. Also it would appear that the latest testimonies to God's activity among the young church, the "miraculous signs and wonders" were shared with everyone.

Something frequently forgotten is that even this church had its problems! Acts 6:2 says that an additional meeting was called by the apostles and elders as a result. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss and decide effective action to immediately combat the problem of apparent unfairness in the distribution of food to the needy.

In Acts 11:26 we are told that the new church at Antioch met for Bible teaching from Barnabas and Saul. The exposition of Scripture and the explanation of Christian living was so effective that people around the believers called them 'Christians'. It was probably at these class meetings that the prophecy of famine was given and as a response an offering made to help relieve the suffering of the Christians in Judea. In

Acts 12:12 Peter knew where to find a prayer meeting, in the home of Mary, mother of John Mark. Luke records "many people had gathered and were praying". A missionary testimony

meeting was held at Antioch according to Acts 14:27 and also in Jerusalem, Acts 15:4. Later in that same chapter there was a meeting of "the apostles and elders" verse 6, and subsequently "the whole church" verse 22, to resolve the debate over circumcision. Should this Jewish rite be compulsory for all members of the Christian church? In Lydia's house in Philippi, Acts 16:40, Paul and Silas held a meeting to encourage the believers following recent persecution and the conversions of the slave girl, and the jailor. At Troas, the believers met to break bread, Acts 20:7.

From these examples we can see the New Testament church had meetings! The purposes varied. They met to praise God, to pray together, to interpret events of the day in the light of Scripture and to receive the Holy Spirit. They met for teaching, for fellowship, for Breaking Bread, to share meals, to distribute gifts to the needy, and to report miracles of God's grace. They met to decide priorities and to sort out problems that arose between them. They received offerings when they met, they heard prophecy, missionary testimony, and they sought to encourage one another to be Christians in a non-Christian world.

Sometimes they met in the temple and sometimes they met in people's homes. Aquila and Priscilla had church meetings in their home, Romans 16:5, 1 Corinthians 16:19, and they were not the only ones.

In a local church, perhaps especially in a small church, meetings may cause problems. There will be those mentioned before who judge spirituality by attendance at meetings. If there are only a few people in the fellowship then there will be pressure to support every meeting. The church itself may also be criticised if all its members do not support various interdenominational gatherings or special events at other places. The other side of the problem is that for all of us there are only seven evenings a week! It is all too easy to be so busy attending this meeting or that meeting that our home life and family life suffer. The church may become inadvertently responsible for breaking up families! As many secular jobs

demand more and more of men and women's evening time, the church has to make sure it is a useful support in times of pressure rather than an extra pressure itself. The balance is very hard to draw because for different members of the congregation the needs are different. Some of the lonely singles, and perhaps couples with grown up children, would quite happily come to a meeting every evening if there was one. Other people with highly demanding jobs, like a doctor with a demanding surgery not finishing until late and then being on call for emergencies, need to be allowed to spend some time at home by themselves or with their families without feeling guilty that they are letting the side down at church. And the doctor should not be penalised, nor his gifts wasted, just because he is not always at the mid-week meeting.

Besides these examples, all Christians need to have time *to be Christians with* their non-Christian neighbours, or work colleagues, or wider family. I know in our church there have been some special evangelistic efforts when I have encouraged people to bring their non-Christian contacts to hear the gospel. On more than one occasion the reply has come back, "I don't have time to have any non-Christian friends, because I spend every evening at church!"

The writer to Hebrews does warn of the danger of trying to be a Christian on your own without any meetings. Hebrews 10:24 and 25, "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

It is a good habit to meet with the church for worship, for prayer, for study and for sharing.

The local Body of Christ needs its every part to fulfil its collective purpose.

But let us not become legalistic. The spiritual life that flows through the living church does give freedom for individuals to be ministered to in their specific needs and situations. The custom of our Lord and the early apostles was to go to the synagogue, but within that general

framework Philip was free to be Spirit-led to Samaria and meet the Ethiopian. Peter was free to be called in a vision to Cornelius. And the believers scattered by Stephen's persecution were free to speak the gospel of Jesus Christ to anyone anywhere at anytime. There was no pressure put on people to attend meetings. Those who went did so because they were moved by the Holy Spirit to do so. Their desire was set on things above the earthly life. When our meetings are similarly peopled - be the number large or small - God will be delighted, and He will show it.

Discussion questions

** Together list the meetings available to members of your fellowship in any week.*

What is each one designed to accomplish?

How could this be achieved in a better way?

** Why do **you** go to the church meetings you go to?*

** How should you apportion time between meetings, being alone with God and investing in building meaningful relationships with non-Christians?*

Chapter 4 **PREACHING RELEVANT SERMONS** Acts 2:14- 41

I calculated that during my seven years and eight months as pastor of Redruth Baptist Church I preached or taught at 571 meetings. Some members of the congregation were there for the majority of those messages. I sometimes wonder if they deserve long service medals.

Have you noticed how sometimes the clock hardly seems to move when some people are in the pulpit? You sit down after a song and settle back into the seat with all good intentions of listening and getting what you can from the message.

It is quite quiet and you hardly dare move a muscle. When your back aches, your nose itches, your eyelids droop, and your head seems to close in on you making you almost drop off to sleep, you look at the clock. Five minutes have passed. Twenty-five to go. Your back, nose, eyelids and head all complain in unison. Yet there are other times when gifted preachers are preaching and an almost accidental look at the watch shows that already nearly an hour has gone by! You, like everyone else there - and there do seem to be more than usual - have been enthralled and absorbed in the message of the Scripture and its meaning in your everyday life.

What makes the difference? On the first occasion you have probably heard a pulpit-filler, while on the latter you heard a real preacher.

A quick look through some of the sermons in the book of Acts will give more indications.

1. Acts 1:15-22. Peter preaches to the assembled believers in a prayer meeting. The background of constant prayer, verse 14, definitely helped. Peter linked the events of the day with Scripture. By doing this he showed them all that God was working. He ended his sermon by a call to action, verses 21 and 22. The call was immediately taken up and put into practice.

2. Acts 2:14-39. Peter preaches to the large crowd who came together in bewilderment hearing their different languages being spoken by the people in an upstairs room. This time the background was Pentecost. The preacher and his team were all filled with the Holy Spirit. He was enabling them to speak the wonders of God in this variety of languages, 2 verses 4 and 11. Again, Peter linked the day's happenings with Scripture. He centred on the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. He pointed out God's activity in all of

this: verse 22 God worked miracles through Jesus, verse 24 God raised Jesus to life, verse 33 God the Father gave to God the Son the promised God the Holy Spirit - and the sounds of blowing wind and bold witness were evidences that the Almighty God was demonstrating something of Himself to those people. The fact that God was at work was both audible and visible, verse 33.

Peter did not make an appeal for action this time round. He did not have to. The crowd were convicted by the Spirit of God. Verse 37 says "they were cut to the heart". Three thousand voices were raised as one. They appealed to the preacher: "Tell us, what shall we do?" Peter faithfully told them how to get right with this awesome God. "Repent and be baptised, receive forgiveness and the Holy Spirit, in the name of Jesus Christ". The largest baptismal service ever took place immediately. If they had the same pattern in that service as we do in our baptismal services today, with a 2/3 minutes testimony by each person, it would have taken about six days! Perhaps my method is not biblical! We know about 3000 were added to the church. We don't know how many heard but responded negatively. Perhaps any who left early did so because they could not hear - after all there was no amplification available. I somehow doubt that many could walk away from God's so clear revelation of Himself.

3. Acts 3:12-26. Peter preaches next to a smaller crowd who ran to Solomon's Colonnade having heard (or seen) that the crippled beggar by the temple gate was now dancing with delight since being helped to his feet by Peter.

The miracle-working preacher immediately points away from himself and to God. Verses 12 and 13 "Not me, but my Master". He goes quickly from the miracle to the message of the miracle. He uses the healing as a signpost to direct people to Jesus Christ. He speaks of the cross and the empty tomb. He shows how the

events fulfil God's promise of Scripture. He appeals to the crowd to "repent and turn to God", verse 19. The sermon was interrupted when the temple guard arrived to arrest Peter and John. That must have destroyed any man-made atmosphere. But there was still a large response, 4:4, which shows that true preaching depends ultimately on God's power.

4. Acts 7:2- 53. Stephen preaches a sermon before the Sanhedrin (the Jewish ruling Council). The opportunity arose when he was charged with blasphemy, 6:11. He spoke about the history of the Jewish nation. He knew that all his hearers would be familiar with that. He highlights what God was doing in his dealings with Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David and Solomon. Some may say that Stephen was foolish in his direct application of the message. Stephen saw himself as being faithful to God. He was using his God-given grace, power and wisdom, 6 verses 8 and 10. Fearlessly, he bore testimony to the resistance God's people had towards God's prophets. He described the Jewish leaders as possessing the Law of God but not practising it. To say that his hearers did not receive this too well would be an understatement! In anger and unleashed hatred they killed him. Stephen's success as a preacher brought him an ugly rejection on earth but a glorious reception in heaven.

5. Acts 10:34- 43. Peter preaches to Cornelius' household in Caesarea. The meeting came about after much prayer and sincere devotion. There was an angelic call to the audience and a God-given vision for the preacher, verses 3 and 17. Both Peter and Cornelius were walking in obedient faith after God. Peter's message began with his own testimony. He explained why he had come to a meeting *that he wouldn't have come to a week earlier*. He shows how God acted for the whole of mankind. God anointed Jesus and was with him in his

doing good, verse 38. God raised Jesus from the dead, verse 40. God prepared witnesses to preach the message of peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ, verses 36 and 42.

Without any warning God moved into that house and into the open hearts of the people. The large gathering, verse 27, was speaking in tongues and praising God, verse 46. The preacher knew when to stop. Whatever he planned was now put aside as preacher and people responded to the overwhelming presence of God. Peter sealed a commitment by ordering the Gentiles be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ.

When he was asked later to give a report of what had happened, he was able to, precisely, 11:4. At every moment all through these exciting events, Peter was listening to God and learning from Him what was happening.

6. Acts 13:16- 41. Paul preaches to the assembled synagogue in Pisidian Antioch. The great missionary had a strategy of going to the synagogue wherever he was in order to meet with, and perhaps speak to, the congregation, 13:5, 14:1, 17:2, 17:10, 17:17, 18:4, and 19:8. He also used other platforms to speak from including the proconsul's home 13:7, the riverside place of prayer 16:13, the market place 17:17, the Areopagus 17:22 (by invitation), and the lecture hall of Tyrannus 19:9.

From this sermon in Acts 13 verse 16 onwards we can learn how he spoke to the Jews. (What he said varied according to where he was and to whom he was speaking.) He did not 'compromise' or change his message. He began where his hearers would identify with what he was saying and then he led them to the cross of Jesus Christ.

He focuses on what God has done in history and is doing today. Through the historical captivity, the Exodus, the promised land, the judges and kings, he traces God's hand working. By quoting John the Baptist Paul speaks about events most of his hearers had lived through.

When he speaks about Jesus Christ, no less than four times he drives home the same vital point: God raised this Jesus from the dead, verses 30, 33, 34 and 37.

In this sermon the application is by way of a warning. The prophets had foretold that some people would choose to scoff at, rather than submit to, this teaching.

Paul lovingly says: "Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you" verse 40. When God is at work the call to attend meetings comes to both the preacher verse 42, and the congregation,

verse 44. The results of the preaching are shown in verses 45, and 48-50. There was a spreading of the word of the Lord and a stirring up of persecution for the servants of the Lord. Some received the word gladly and others rejected it with hostility. The preacher had no control over either response. That was between individuals and God.

7. Acts 14:15-17. Paul and Barnabas preach to the crowd at Lystra who are wanting to deify the evangelists after witnessing the healing of another lame man. This preaching was in immediate response to an error beginning to take hold of the people around and about. "Don't look at men look at the Maker!" See behind the events, whether supernatural or everyday. Find the testimony of God to Himself.

8. Acts 17:22- 31. Paul preaches to the meeting of the Areopagus in Athens. The comment of Luke in verse 21 sets the context. These were men who liked to discuss and debate, not to come to the truth and make a decision, but simply

because they liked discussing and debating. This makes even more startling Paul's chosen topic: a clear declaration of the One they call the Unknown God. The Athenians were open to admitting they did not know everything. Paul seizes the opportunity and proclaims God the Creator, verse 24, God the Spirit, verse 24, God the Sustainer of all life, verse 25, God the truly self-sufficient, verse 25, God the planner of human history, verse 26, God the encourager of men to worship Him, verse 27, God the omnipresent, verse 28, God the commander, verse 30, God the Judge, verse 31 and God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead, verse 31. The response shows that while the majority either sneered or stalled, among the minority both men and women were soundly converted.

If I draw together some of the characteristics of these sermons we should get a picture of what it is to preach relevant sermons. Immerse preacher and congregation in prayer. Apply the Scripture to daily life. Analyse daily life using Scripture as the gauge. Seek the fulness of the Holy Spirit for speaker and listeners. Major on what God is doing. This needs emphasising. All good preaching is God-centred and not man-centred. The danger in starting with man's needs is that God is involved on man's terms and for man's benefit. In all of our examples the listeners are told about a God before whom they are accountable for responding to His actions.

Other characteristics of relevant sermons include beginning with subjects or illustrations that are known to the people. Never be afraid to apply God's truth directly. Accept the consequences of doing so. Be ready to stop preaching when God moves in a special way. Drive the central theme of your message home repeatedly. If it takes three, four or seven direct blows to knock in the nail of

truth, never mind the noise of the banging - drive it home. Always bring people to a point of action. Let no-one leave without having said 'yes' or 'no' to God. How we need God to raise up more preachers in our churches!

In Acts there are at least fifty-seven references to different people preaching the message in some form. They "declared the wonders of God", 2:11. They "never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ", 5:42. They gave "attention to prayer and the ministry of the word", 6:4. They "proclaimed the Christ", 8:5. They "preached the word wherever they went", 8:4. They "proved that Jesus is the Christ", 9:22. They told "the good news about the Lord Jesus", 11:20. They "spoke so effectively that a great number believed", 14:1. They "taught and preached the word of the Lord", 15:35. They "reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and to rise from the dead", 17:2 and 3. They "spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God", 19:8.

It is true Paul preached a rather long sermon in Troas, but even that ended with a mighty miracle that led to more preaching, see Acts 20:7-12.

In his farewell speech to the Ephesian elders, Paul sums up his own view of his preaching amongst them: "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God", 20:27. His methods are shown in verses 20 and 21: "I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus".

Bible teaching and preaching need to be emphasised again in order to see people coming to faith. Romans 10:17 says "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ". The local

church should commission people to preach the message of Christ. This enables others to hear and to have enough faith to call on the name of the Lord and be saved, Romans 10:13-15.

Just because some church sermons are not up to the mark a certain group of people today want to relegate preaching to a back seat. The answer to boring sermons is not to ban preaching. It is to be much more selective as to who is in the pulpit. Pulpits are for preaching and therefore not for every pastor, not for every public speaker, not for every person in the church on a rota, and not for anybody who is willing to fill the empty place. There are times when an empty pulpit would speak more eloquently than a full one - but the congregations do not generally want to hear that truth! If we said 'No' to more people entering the pulpit, we may be able to say a wholehearted 'Yes' to more of what is said from that same pulpit (and to the way it is said!).

Let every local church recognise who has gifts to develop. Let them be like the church at Lystra that released Timothy to be schooled by Paul and Silas, who then sent him to different places with the commission to "Preach the Word", 2 Timothy 4:2.

Let every individual who feels called to preach study the progress of Timothy, which is outlined later, in chapter 17 of this book.

Discussion questions

* *Define the difference between criticism of a preacher and discerning whether God is speaking.*

(See Philippians 1:9 and 10).

* *"You will preach better with training".*

"You must preach the message as God gives it - you don't need to prepare".

Are both these statements valid?

Is there a middle line between them?

Is there a way they can go together?

Chapter 5 **SHOWING CHRIST'S POWER** Acts 3:1-26; 4:1-4

Christians in a small church often say: "If only we had the resources of a large congregation, more suitable premises, a greater workforce and a stronger financial base, we would be able to be much more effective in our witness."

Strangely, I've sometimes heard Christians in larger fellowships seeking almost the reverse! More people in a church means more demands on the ministry in terms of money and manpower, and it gives greater scope for the devil to get a foothold and create time consuming problems. I cannot think of a single incident in Acts when the newly-born church prayed that God would provide the resources before they embarked on witness. It was as they did the things God was telling them to do, that He provided all they needed. Surely this was the practical outworking of the promise Jesus had given,

Acts 1:8, "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." God the Holy Spirit prompted some people to go as missionary evangelists, Acts 16:9-12. He also nudged others to provide financially for the team, Philippians 4:15 and 16. The Holy Spirit burdened still more Christians to wrestle in prayer for the expanding ministry,

Colossians 4:12, and to send encouraging messengers back and forth between the team and supporting churches, Philippians 2:25-30. The Christians, and the

churches, that took God at His word, clearly showed God was in their activities. They could not have done what they did if God was not demonstrating His own power.

Perhaps those of us in small fellowships ought to meditate on Paul's words: "That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong", 2 Corinthians 12:10. Our inability is God's opportunity. Our acknowledged impotence is a prerequisite to an exhibition of God's never-failing supply. As we take steps of faith we prepare the ignition switch for God's power.

In Acts 3 Peter and John had an unplanned encounter that visibly shook the people of Jerusalem. From this story it can be seen immediately that the basis for any similar work of God is prayer. If Peter and John had not been going to pray at the temple then this miracle would never have happened. It was as they went to pray that they encountered the particular man whose need God was about to meet.

God brought Peter and John into contact with this man for a purpose. He does nothing at all by accident. The man was at his place of need. He knew his own charity collecting was quite successful by the temple and so friends carried him there everyday. I am reminded of this story every time I see the lame, blind and otherwise disadvantaged beggars in Khartoum Barhi, Sudan. They are brought to sit daily outside the mosques and along the walls of the church compounds. This was probably the lame man's only source of income. Presumably, Peter and John must have seen this man before, but today was going to be different. God had something special in mind and only He knew it. The Christians did not know it and neither did the lame man. God made sure the right people were in the right

place at the right time. We need to believe He is constantly at work in and around us preparing our circumstances.

It is sad to see that this lame man did not expect very much from religious people. He begged for money because he knew he would receive some. He did not ask for anything more. I wonder what people around us see in our lives that would make them expect a miracle? Perhaps our community expects very little from the church, because the church expects very little from God. What kind of advertisements are we for the living, triumphant, more than capable, Jesus Christ?

Peter allowed God to speak to him as he looked at the needy man. He stopped what he was going to do. He thought about the condition of the lame man, and the money that was being sought. He knew that money would be at best a temporary solution. The need would reappear when the money was spent. I am sure Peter also recalled many of the miracles he had witnessed while following the Lord Jesus on his travelling ministry. He knew that Jesus healed people. He remembered the events of Luke 5:17-26 when a paralysed man was lowered through a hole in the roof by friends who wanted him to be able to lie at the feet of Jesus Christ. The Lord had demonstrated his authority over sin and sickness when he had said to the man "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." "Jesus still had the same authority now", Peter reasoned. "Jesus could heal him, but would He?"

Peter had to step out in faith. He was going into the realm of the unknown. He was entering an area beyond his own control. He was applying the Jesus Christ he knew to a need that he saw. Acts 3:6 "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.'"

To name the name of Jesus Christ was to claim His presence. Peter admitted he could not meet the need himself, but he knew Someone who could. Publicly, courageously, and in incontrovertible faith, Peter and John risked looking foolish or being ridiculed as failures. They demonstrated Christ's power in the complete healing of the man from every trace of weakness, stiffness and being lame.

Peter's words led him into action himself. He told the man to walk and then immediately helped him up on to his feet. Both Peter and the once-lame man were walking by faith. The presence of John in a supporting role encouraged Peter in his boldness.

There are three simple facts in this historical event. Firstly, a lame man was lifted on to his feet. His need was totally met. He could not only walk, but jump as well. Secondly, a man with faith in Jesus Christ showed the truth of the words he spoke. A living visual aid could not be disputed. Thirdly, the people who were watching were made to think about God. They knew the beggar by the Beautiful Gate and they had never seen him do what he was doing now. The crowd gathered hardly able to believe the transformation their eyes could see.

How did Peter resource this miracle? He said "What I have I give you", verse 6. This is the secret of demonstrating Christ's power. Jesus Christ commenced His work when He was living with His disciples. He continues His work after his death by living through those same people. Today Jesus Christ lives through individuals and fellowships who:

1. actively pray, verse 1.
2. listen to the expressed needs of people around them, verse 3.
3. attract attention by becoming involved with them, verses 4, 5.
4. invite Jesus Christ to live in their situation, verses 6.

5. encourage the needy to act on the basis of faith, verses 7, 8.

6. clearly state that all appreciation should go to Jesus Christ, verses 12 and 16.

We have all the resources we need to do everything God is calling us to do. As we obey His commands He supplies all that we need.

When my wife, Brenda, and I resigned from the pastorate of Redruth Baptist Church, we also left behind a modest, but regular, monthly salary. We believed God was calling us to a wider ministry, largely in the county of Cornwall, but embracing some overseas responsibilities too. We did not know how God would provide for our financial needs or where ministry invitations would come from. We did believe that God would meet every need according to the inexhaustible ability of Jesus Christ. And He has! We have learned the secret of being content in times of want as well as in times of plenty. "To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen." Philippians 4:20. To us, and to those close to us, this is another way in which Christ has shown His power. In three years of national recession, employment uncertainties and economic difficulties our God has proven worthy of implicit trust. He always will.

In the second half of Acts chapter 3 and on into chapter 4 we can read how Peter used the opportunity of an assembled crowd to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. As Peter used the opportunity, so God used Peter. This is genuine Christian witness. The believers shared what they knew with people who needed to know it. They gave what they had to people who needed to receive it. And several hundred men became Christians through what they saw and heard, Acts 4:4. The crowd on the day of Pentecost gathered because of what they heard, Acts 2:6. They were attracted by things they could "see and hear", 2:33. As

Christianity touched more and more people the apostles worked "miraculous signs", 2:43. The Greek word 'semeion' is used elsewhere of a personal authenticating autograph, 2 Thessalonians 3:17. This was Jesus Christ pointing to the reality and relevance of Himself through their activities. We need to be careful at this point. Not all miracles come from God. Not all who claim to work miracles, even in Jesus' name, have His signature on their ministries. See Matthew 7:15-23. As a general guide we can discern God's workmanship by looking at a person's everyday lifestyle and conformity to Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ never drew attention to His miracles (with the possible exception of John 14:11, when He used them as a second-best evidence as to who He was). We have noted the crowd gathered around Peter and John in Acts 3:9 and 10 when they "saw" a walking lame beggar. The Jewish rulers who were threatened by the early Christians' activities were impressed when they "saw" the courage with which Peter and John stood their ground in a hostile interrogation, 4 verses 13 and 14. It is not unreasonable to infer that the people around the Jerusalem church heard the bold preaching, 4:31, and saw that "there were no needy persons among" that Christian community as their love for Christ loosed their hold on material possessions, 4 verses 34 and 35. News travelled very fast when Ananias and Sapphira were taken out of the church by God for lying to the Holy Spirit. Little wonder that "fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events", 5 verses 5 and 11. More "miraculous signs and wonders" demonstrated the living presence of Jesus Christ, this time "among the people", 5:12. The Christians could be seen meeting together regularly, 5:12 and 42, and people would have heard about the incredible healings being witnessed even if they had not been personally involved, 5:15-16.

Neighbours and friends would also have known about the great (Greek: mega) persecution that resulted in many Christians fleeing for their lives or being arrested and jailed because of their beliefs, 8:1-3. If they were not eye-witnesses they at least knew people who knew of someone mysteriously missing from their street.

In Samaria, as Philip proclaimed Christ, "when the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said", 8:6. Simon the sorcerer "saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles hands, ..." 8:18. I wonder what went through people's minds when they tried to understand what had happened to Saul of Tarsus? After weeks of dreadfully harassing Christians, 9:1, he appears in Damascus a changed man preaching the same gospel he had so vehemently opposed. "All those who heard him were astonished and asked, 'Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?'" 9:21. At Lydda, God used Peter to heal the paralytic Aeneas. "All those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord" 9:35. The even greater miracle of Dorcas being raised from the dead "became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord," 9:42. The proconsul of Cyprus, Sergius Paulus, saw his attendant Elymas the sorcerer struck blind. He also heard the word of God through Barnabas and Saul. He became a believer on the evidence of what he both saw and heard, 13:6-12. What do people see and hear from the Christian church today? They see odd buildings, often inadequately maintained, with sub-modern day standards of lighting, heating and plumbing. However it does not matter much to them because the churches are closed and shuttered for at least eighty per cent of the

week anyway. Should folk happen to attend a service they hear quaint music that doesn't quite fit into any commercial radio listening pattern. They are given several books to look at that are dog-eared and contain a language they had gratefully left behind with Shakespeare at school. They may see an effeminately dressed man at the front. They see sombre looking people even at their places of work, where the Christians have a deserved reputation for being those who don't join in with anything because they are too busy with church activities (an apparent contradiction in terms!), or because they don't approve of them in any case. The outsiders see and hear Christians in sincere evangelistic enterprise sometimes doing the world's things not quite as well as the world does them, and yet saying this is because of Jesus Christ and the difference He makes! When will we learn?

In Acts 19 the Bible records what happened when Paul arrived in Ephesus. After two years of evangelising, with some conversions, the Ephesian Chamber of Commerce decide to oppose him. Some of their businesses, built on a basis of false worship, were being severely hit as people were born again. They stirred up mob riots to threaten Paul and the little church, complaining that their city culture and traditions were being undermined. The goddess Artemis was their pride and joy, as well as a good source of income! Confusion and uproar ensued. Later on, when Paul wrote back to those Christians from a prison cell, he prayed a prayer that should inspire anyone who wants to see God's power tangibly demonstrated in their fellowship. "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", Ephesians 3:20 and 21. When there are just one or two

people who will be available for God to do His work in a place, He will always work through them. The success of their ministry depends simply on their own availability. God's ability is never in question. Ever since He made everything out of nothing at the creation of the world, God has been pleased to partner those who are ready to help Him express Himself to those who don't yet know Him.

Discussion questions

* *What things does the community expect from "religious" people?*

What do you hope to show the community?

Be specific rather than general.

* *What requirements are there for demonstrating Christ's power?*

Chapter 6 **OVERCOMING OPPOSITION** Acts 4:1- 31; 5:1- 11; 6:1- 7

According to the dictionary, to oppose means 'to resist, to strive to defeat, to argue against or to be an obstacle to'. The Greek word 'antithesis' is used by Paul in his letter to Timothy. He warns the young church leader "Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and in so doing have wandered from the faith. Grace be with you", 1 Timothy 6:20 and 21. He is saying 'Be prepared for opposition to your work. It has sidetracked others and will try to sidetrack you'. In 2 Timothy 2:24-26 he encourages Timothy to press on: "And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their

senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will." It is much easier said than done to gently instruct those who oppose you!

In Falmouth Bay there are frequently several ships anchored and waiting to use the docks. The anchor allows them the freedom to drift with the tide and wind. Although basically in the same place the ships face in different directions at different times. When called into port, the engines are started and the bow set on the course for the short journey. It may be against the prevailing conditions of sea and weather, but the captain knows he has to plough through to progress and meet his goal. Similarly, a church that has been marking time can swing about sufficiently to keep most of its members happy with its general tenure. But once that church embarks on a mission, to move forward with God into unfamiliar territory, a variety of opponents will be revealed who will do their very best to take the church in another direction or to maintain the status quo.

There are many examples of opposition to God's work recorded for us in the book of Acts. In chapter 4 Peter and John were arrested and questioned by the religious authorities of the day. The Sadducees did not believe in a resurrection and were adamantly against the apostles' emphasis that God raised Jesus from the dead. In Acts 5 God's work was opposed by a husband and wife who made out they were totally committed to community sharing but in reality they were holding back. It was like a cancer attacking from within rather than an open bombardment from outside, but it was opposition nonetheless because, unchecked, it could have brought God's work into disrepute.

In Acts 6 complaints about unfairness were the next obstacles the church had to overcome. Perhaps a lack of efficient administration and supervision were

contributing factors. In the second half of the chapter Stephen is having to face false accusations from religious people who had been stung by the truth he preached. By the end of chapter 7 this had intensified and led to the first Christian martyrdom - yet this apparent reversal for the church had planted the seeds for still greater growth - through Saul of Tarsus. His aggravating persecution of Christians was violent and bloody. The phrase in Acts 8:3 "But Saul began to destroy the church" is explained by the various translations: "made havoc of the church" Authorised Version, "laid waste the church" Revised Standard Version, "harassed the church bitterly" J.B. Phillips, and in the Living Bible "Paul was like a wild man, going everywhere to devastate the believers, even entering private homes and dragging out men and women alike and jailing them." No wonder the believers found it hard to accept his conversion in chapter 9!

By Acts 9:23, 24 and 29 the hunter has himself become the hunted. I wonder if we really would like to have lived in the New Testament church? I have been alongside Christian converts in the Islamic Republic of Sudan and have experienced with them their job losses, home evictions and life threats. Some of them have been like Paul on both sides of the religious fence at different times. Those who oppose us in this way I am sure we are not called to "gently instruct", but Jesus Christ does tell us to "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you", Matthew 5:44. Paul wrote "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse", Romans 12:14. The Greek for 'bless' literally means 'to speak well of'. As Stephen gave up his life, he had prayed blessing on his executioners. I wonder if Paul could ever get those words of Acts 7:60 out of his mind? I am

sure Stephen prayed that those who now wanted to kill him would soon have the same life-transforming experience of Jesus Christ that he had.

The next opposition to God's work of church growth comes from fellow believers in Acts 11:2. Peter had obeyed God in going to the Gentile household of Cornelius. Those believers who had a cut and dried, black and white, theologically sound list of do's and don'ts, criticised Peter for 'doing a don't'! They distanced themselves from what he had done and passed judgement on him for being so wrong. Through his response, 11:4, Peter shows us how to "gently instruct" our opponents. "Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened." He was patient. It took his time, but he gladly gave it. He was personal. He spoke face to face with those initiating the controversy. He was also accurate with his testimony, neither covering up incriminating evidence nor embellishing it to suit his own view. Because Peter himself had concluded it was God's leading through the vision, he trusted God and respected his fellow believers sufficiently to let the facts speak for themselves. It was the right thing to do, 11:18.

In the next few chapters the church encounters continuing opposition from outside its own ranks. There is martyrdom and imprisonment, Acts 12:1-4; a plot to stone the evangelists, 14:5 and 6; and an actual attempt to do so in 14:19.

There were more false accusations and beatings in 21:27-36.

Consistently the religious people were jealous of the influence of evangelical Christians and they tried to incite riots at Pisidian Antioch Acts 13:45, 50; Iconium 14:2; Lystra 14:19; Thessalonica 17:5-9; Berea 17:13; Corinth 18:6; and Ephesus 19:9. The phrases used to describe their methods may ring bells in our minds today. The opposition "talked abusively against what Paul was saying". They

"stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas". They "poisoned their minds against the brothers". They "won the crowd over". They "formed a mob and started a riot in the city". They "agitated the crowds", "became abusive" and "publicly maligned the Way". How hard it is for us to react in the way Jesus Christ urged us to in His Sermon on the Mount. It must be possible though, because God never calls us to do anything without enabling us to do it. So when we encounter stiff opposition that hurts us in our attempts to follow God's will remember, "Blessed are you when people insult you, and persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you", Matthew 5:11 and 12.

I can find three other types of opposition in Acts. On the island of Cyprus a spiritualist false prophet called Elymas deliberately tried to stop the proconsul Sergius Paulus from being converted, Acts 13:6-12. His spiritual blindness was visibly demonstrated by physical blindness at Paul's words, verse 11. The sorcerer's deceit and trickery were no match for the man of God walking in the Holy Spirit on the Great Commission. At Philippi a young fortune teller whose evil spirit recognised Paul and Silas as "servants of the Most High God" was released "in the name of Jesus Christ", Acts 16:16-18. The ensuing clash with the business people who had lost a valuable source of revenue actually appeared to end in disaster. The apostles were imprisoned. But there was a reason God allowed their loss of freedom. It was to demonstrate His own sovereign power to the Philippian jailer and his household who had an encounter with the truth they probably would not have had any other way. God's work will always be done God's way. A similar confrontation in Ephesus with the silversmith Demetrius

contributed to the formation of a church that knew "every spiritual blessing in Christ", Ephesians 1:3;

Acts 19:23-41. No spiritual force on earth or in heaven is able to permanently withstand the Christian church as she goes on the offensive in the name of her Lord and Master Jesus Christ.

In Lystra, Acts 14:11-13, the people were so impressed by the miraculous healing of a lame man that they tried to deify Paul and Barnabas. It is a subtle attack of the enemy to try and make the success of a mission into the failure of the missionary. Paul and Barnabas kept their feet firmly on the spiritual ground by insisting on their own humanity. Anything of value done through them was the activity of Almighty God who would use people that turned away from idols and acknowledged Him alone as the Creator and keeper of all things.

While considering opposition we must not pass over the doctrinal dispute resolved by the Council at Jerusalem in Acts 15. We will look at it in more detail in chapter 15, "sorting out tradition". The opposition to the growing church came in the form of making additions to the Christian gospel. The Jewish rite of circumcision was essential for salvation according to these protagonists who were attempting to influence the whole of God's work from Jerusalem. This implied that Jesus Christ's death and resurrection were insufficient for the salvation of any human being. To their credit the church leaders convened a Council to consider the issue in its entirety. They heard testimony of what God had been doing, they considered the Scriptural injunctions. Finally they clearly communicated with all the involved parties their collective ruling, using both a written document and respected Christian men who could explain it and answer questions.

There will always be opposition to any work of God. The devil will always try to destroy the work, and he frequently uses deceit as one of his ploys. In over twenty years of Christian ministry in England I have experienced more difficulty from within church ranks than from outside. One church minister closed his churches to me because I preached too much about being born again. Some church members, sincerely longing for church growth, would not change from their traditional service times and forms. They wanted a revival within their old system and not simply revival from God at any cost. I have known lonely times when God-given vision has been frustrated by lack of faith. I have experienced being squeezed out of decision-making by false accusations. I have been misquoted, misunderstood and misrepresented, as I suspect many Christian leaders are from time to time.

I am pleased to say there have been times when godly friends around me have rescued me from wandering into the devil's traps. No human being is infallible nor incapable of making mistakes. We can all listen to and learn from criticism. It may be God's way of speaking to us. Paul urged the Galatians: "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you may also be tempted", Galatians 6:1. If we lead a Christian group and never accept criticism we will soon find ourselves leading a cult. We must remain permanently open to rebuke, correction and direction from God's word and God's people.

Yet, at the same time, we must learn to overcome the opposition that is derived from the evil one and his hosts. Faith is the shield which extinguishes every single one of his flaming arrows. Faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. It is often easier

to retaliate ourselves than to wait for God to exact justice in His own time, but true church leaders are gentle rather than violent or quarrelsome, 1 Timothy 3:3, In the three initial examples of opposition in Acts, the church's reaction gives us guidelines to follow ourselves. After the threats of the Sanhedrin, the early church prayed unitedly "Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus", Acts 4:29 and 30. A fresh infilling with the Holy Spirit was God's immediate answer. When Ananias and Sapphira deceived the church with their hypocritical involvement in financial sharing God revealed instant judgement which brought a very healthy fear of God on the rest of the church and community, Acts 5:11. Peter's God-given discernment was the trigger for these events. Then, when he and the other apostles found themselves in danger of neglecting their priorities of prayer and preaching by becoming absorbed in administration, they involved the entire church in developing a practical solution worked out by spirit-filled men to facilitate the excellent and necessary practical caring ministries of the church. God honoured their stand by giving growth and blessing.

Suffering is not a sign of failure. "The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name", Acts 5:41. Paul was warned before his ministry had even started that he would suffer in carrying it out. The Lord told his counsellor Ananias "I will show him how much he must suffer for my name", Acts 9:16. Paul writes a list of them in 2 Corinthians 11:23-33. Verse 30 says "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness" and in 2 Corinthians 12:9 he quotes the Lord's words to him when he

wanted to be delivered from the suffering, "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." We will be mature in our Christian attitude to opposition when we can genuinely agree with Paul in verse 10. "That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecution, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong". To take pleasure in everything God allows to happen, while continuing to work out His will, is Christian worship at its highest level.

Discussion questions

* *Share how you define opposition*

- *in your personal Christian walk*

- *in the life of your fellowship*

* *How can outright opposition be recognised?*

How can subtle opposition be recognised?

Work out together a plan of Christlike thinking for facing opposition.

Chapter 7 **POOLING RESOURCES Acts 4:32- 37; 11:27- 30**

In the familiar passage at the end of the day of Pentecost several characteristics of a church on the move with God are highlighted. The people who made up the Jerusalem congregations were a teaching and learning people, a worshipping and praying people, and a giving and receiving people. This all happened as they frequently met together and responsibly put their Christian beliefs into practice. In a materialistic world like ours today the recapturing of a Christian faith that helps every individual Christian use his money and his possessions in a way that will

always please God is of paramount importance. The witness of a person so securely gripped by God that he willingly loosens his own grasp of all other things is dramatic. It is outstandingly different from the spirit of our age.

There are extremes to be avoided on either side of a healthy attitude. Some Christians try to argue that God is far above money and materialism and they say that God is not even remotely interested in how we use what we ourselves have earned. This piously ignorant attitude only shows that these Christians have not carefully read the accounts of Jesus Christ's own life and teachings. Money appears on so many Gospel pages.

Jesus taught his disciples to give secretly to the needy, Matthew 6:2-4, and to invest far more in heavenly treasures than earthly ones, Matthew 6:19-21. When he sent the twelve disciples out to preach the kingdom of heaven, he promised to supply their material needs through the people ministered to, Matthew 10:9 and 10. When a multitude needed feeding and the disciples had no resources of their own, Jesus used a little boy's freely donated lunch to feed everyone satisfactorily, Mark 6:35-44. He miraculously provided for the temple tax when it was due, even though he could have argued for exemption, Matthew 17:24-27; and he urged all citizens to pay due taxes to the government of the day, Mark 12:13-17. He warned a rich young man that continuing selfishness over his great wealth was a serious obstacle to his desire of following Christ, Matthew 19:16-22. Jesus told parables about wages and investments, contracts and trusts, Matthew 20:1-16, 25:14-30. He was certainly interested in the attitude of the giver more than the monetary value of the gift, Luke 21:1-4.

The other extreme to be avoided is a fraudulent teaching of western Christianity which says that God wants his children to enjoy the best of salaries and the most

luxurious homes and cars, the prosperity of materialism being falsely seen as a sign of spiritual blessing. There are some authors I have read that I would love to accompany me to the flourishing churches in Sudan's camps for displaced tribal people. I would challenge them to teach their distortions of truth in that context. How can they explain Scriptures like 1 Timothy 6:6? Godliness is not a means to financial gain, "but godliness with contentment is great gain". Paul's own testimony in Philippians 4:12 says "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". There is no doubt at all that "my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus", Philippians 4:19. But if Christians ignore God's advice about the slavery of debt, the deceitfulness of riches, the results of loving money and ignoring the desperate plight of others, then the church will not be a New Testament church.

Acts 4:32 shows us that the resources of the Jerusalem church consisted simply of the total resources of every member of it. "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". Just like in Acts 2 verses 44 and 45 here again the Christians demonstrate that people are more important than possessions. The needs of some were met with the money raised by others who sold surplus property to meet immediate requirements. Acts 4 verses 36 and 37 help us to see that the church that shares everything, is made up of individuals who have learned to share. The Authorised version: "they had all things in common" translates the Greek 'koinos' and Latin 'communis'. Everybody shared everything because everything belonged to the community in any case! For the church to be

strong every person needed to be strong. Any weakness made the whole church vulnerable. Collectively they all ensured individual needs were satisfied. When problems developed in the mechanics of sharing, top priority was given by the whole church to an acceptable resolution of the crisis, Acts 6vs1-7.

Because the needs around us today are so great, the growing church needs to balance realism against rashness. Ten years ago a rat ran over a startled lady's foot in our mid-week prayer meeting at Redruth. There was a damp problem in the building which was built, over a small stream, more than a hundred years before. How could 60-70 people possibly raise thousands of pounds to effectively solve the problem once and for all, and in doing so, create a pleasant and functional building for church activities? Development and renovation plans were drawn up and costed. The church prayed together. The leadership invited every member to make an intelligent guess as to how much extra money they could give during the next two years towards this work. To many people this was a step of faith in deciding before God a financial commitment: their part in the overall church project. We discovered that approximately half of what was needed could be raised in this way. The church prayed again. We had done our part individually, could we now trust God to provide the balance? Perhaps as a sensible steward (or perhaps lacking in faith!) I arranged with our church's bank an overdraft facility to enable the contractors to be paid as the work was completed stage by stage. Just over two years later the new concrete floor was completed, the four classrooms and re-equipped kitchen were carpetted, new chairs and tables, a gas central heating system, a suspended ceiling were installed to reduce ongoing costs, and all the workmen were paid in full on or before the due dates. The overdraft facility had not been used. Some capital

from church members and friends had been borrowed interest-free for a half-roof replacement which unexpectedly became essential as the other work progressed, but other offered monies did not have to be utilised. More people were joining the church as they were converted. The resource base grew as the congregation increased. Our missionary commitments and evangelistic commitments were not curtailed in any way, and in fact increased as the months rolled by. There were times when God's supply was at the last moment and other occasions when we expected the bills to arise because we had so much money in hand. In a limited way we had tried to follow Paul's guidance from 2 Corinthians 9:7, "Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver". We had certainly proved verse 8 to be true: "And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work". We tried not to be penny-pinching nor to use pounds unnecessarily. We trusted God and took our own responsibilities seriously. It was an experience in giving that ran parallel with a time of growing both spiritually and numerically. People grew in Christian maturity as they put biblical principles on money into practice. The congregation grew in numbers as the Lord graciously added every week (not every day!) those who were being saved. The whole exercise was such an encouragement to everyone involved.

I recommend strongly to any fellowship of Christians who are put off from enhancing their ministry because of the cost of men or materials in the development programme, consider carefully the cost of not going ahead. It is possible to say "We cannot afford to do this" when we should be saying "We cannot afford not to do this". When we stop actively trusting God and only do

what we can manage ourselves, church becomes just another local social club, hardly demonstrating at all the living presence of Jesus Christ.

When I have been teaching Christian stewardship in our pastors' and evangelists' conferences in other countries objections have sometimes been made on the grounds of poverty. "It's all very well for you affluent British Christians to live this way, but we have barely enough to feed ourselves and our families. We must rely on western aid to help us". This statement is wrong on at least two counts. Firstly, all trust must be in God alone and not in any other better-off Christian. Our needs are for God to supply however He chooses. Secondly, the Macedonian churches set a precedent for all poor Christians to follow, 2 Corinthians 8:1-4. Notice the adjectives in verse 2: "Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity". God's grace enabled these believers to give sacrificially beyond their own abilities. Since Jesus Christ used five bread sticks and two fish to feed five thousand people, dare we say "my little contribution makes no difference to God's work today"? Paul tells the Corinthians in verse 12 "For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have". In Indonesia and in the Sudan I have accepted very small gifts of money given to me after my teaching. To me the cash value was practically nil, although to the villagers who donated it was costly. I have accepted these gifts because it showed that these believers were beginning to live by the Bible's financial principles. In each case the Christian community has received clothes, books, medicines etc. when I have left. Their giving brought an indirect reward in kind (which would have happened anyway!). But the spiritual lessons learned in practice could prove of immense value as the churches realise that when they

share their own resources, they can support their own ministries and they are blessed as they give.

In Acts 11:27-30 the one year old church at Antioch is made aware of impending famine disaster for believers elsewhere. "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". The Macedonian Christians facilitated Paul's ministry at Corinth, 2 Corinthians 11:9, and elsewhere, Philippians 4:15. At other times Paul worked with his own hands to meet the needs of himself and his team, Acts 18:3, 20:34.

The pooling of resources involves more than money. Giving was an attitude of life cultivated by the early Christians. In Acts 2:45 and 4:34 and 35 they gave cash to meet daily needs. In Acts 6:1 a daily food distribution was underway. In Acts 9:19-28 some in the churches of Damascus and Jerusalem gave hospitality to a new convert, Saul, and this involved considerable risk to themselves. There are several countries of the world today where this is a vital ministry God calls some to engage in. Hospitality was given to God's servants, Acts 10:6, and to those who came seeking spiritual help, verse 23. An open heart for God led to Lydia's home being opened for God's work at Philippi in Acts 16:14 and 15. Aquila and Priscilla shared their home and job with Paul at Corinth in Acts 18:2 and 3 and they used their home as a training centre for Apollos, verse 26. Christian workers gave as well as received hospitality, Acts 21:8-10, where Philip and his family entertained Paul's preaching team.

A simple poem I wrote in August 1969, just before I started my ministry with Ambassadors For Christ, still sums up for me the attitude I try to keep year by year towards God and His work.

MY PRAYER August 1969 by Colin Salter

What Gifts have I to offer, Lord,
To One so great as You?
How can my thoughts, and deeds, and words
Do anything for You?
It is beyond my feeble mind
To comprehend this need:
That God in heaven, all powerful, kind,
For His work relies on me!

What right have I to withhold from you
All that You've given to me,
When I consider all You've done
By dying on Calvary?
O Lord, You've every right to judge
If I misuse my time.
Help me to let my actions, all
Be governed, Lord, by Thine.

Where can I go? What can I do?
Christ conquered sin for me.
Surely I must tell all the world
That they can now be free.

God, grant that I may give my all
For the task I'm given to do;
Lord, give me grace to heed Your call
To reach the world for You. Amen

Paul told the Corinthian Christians, "Just as you excel in everything - in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us - see that you also excel in this grace of giving." 2 Corinthians 8:7. Don't be concerned about what other people do. If you do what God wants you to do you will be successful in His eyes.

Discussion questions

* *Share in your group the things Jesus gave up to come to earth.*

*Now share the things Christians find it hard to give up
or things they are unwilling to place at Jesus' disposal.*

* *"My church gives to overseas missionaries and I give to help feed the starving".*

*How would you help someone think through their personal Christian
attitude to giving?*

Chapter 8 **ALLOWING GOD TO PURIFY** **Acts 5:1- 11**

Church discipline involves the maintenance of order and obedience, the acceptance of authority and the observance of all biblical principles concerning collective Christian life and practice. Paul's letters to Timothy were written to promote discipline. "Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct

themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth", 1 Timothy 3:14 and 15. Perhaps we wrongly think of discipline as only being negative. "If someone does something wrong they should be disciplined". It may be better for us to understand that if the person had been disciplined himself, and lived his life in a disciplined, self-controlled, Holy Spirit ordered way, the wrong things would not have happened. Do not confuse discipline and punishment. Punishment is the result of the lack of discipline. A child at school who does not produce his required homework may be given a detention for one hour after lessons (it used to be in my school days anyway!). The teacher hopes that this action will encourage the student to do his homework next time and hand it in during the lesson period. The penal correction is aimed at promoting discipline.

God gives to all His servants a spirit of self-discipline. "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline",

2 Timothy 1:7. Those three qualities can be compared with the three wires of a British Standard safety plug. Before connection to mains electricity the plug of the electrical appliance, say a washing machine, should have the brown live wire, the blue neutral wire, and the yellow/green earth wire all safely secured to the pins. If any one is loose there will be a malfunction which could even be very dangerous. "Power", "love" and "self-discipline" also go together in the Christian life. Power without love is dangerous. Love without power is insipid. Power and love without the control of self-discipline could well lead to unnecessary problems between the different people who make up a local church.

As an example, think about the power made available to us in Jesus Christ. We are free to live as we believe it is right to live. Some may consider we are free to

go to the public bar and drink beer. However, because we love our Lord, and because we also love His people in the church around us, we may discipline ourselves not to go to the pub, or not to drink more than half a pint if we do go. Our love encourages self-control over our power! Paul told the Corinthian Christians: "Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak", 1 Corinthians 8:9. That was concerning eating meat previously offered to idols. In Romans 14, writing about vegetarians, Sabbath-observers and kosher meat-eaters, Paul also says: "Therefore let us stop passing judgement on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacles in your brother's way", Romans 14:13. "Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification", verse 19. God-given power, love and self-discipline are essential for this.

But what happens in a congregation when a brother and sister who are only half-heartedly committed to the Lord's work, hypocritically try to deceive the fellowship into thinking that they are selflessly sacrificing to meet the needs of others - when in fact they are not? What happens when they tell lies to church leaders? This is what Ananias and Sapphira did in Acts 5:1-11. Where does collective discipline come into the church?

The background to the event is a fast-growing fellowship in Jerusalem exhibiting "great power" and "much grace" Acts 4:33. The power of changed lives witnessing for Jesus Christ, the grace of forgiveness, love and care for one another all made it a pleasure to be a part of the fellowship. Unfortunately any growing fellowship will soon have within its ranks people like Ananias and Sapphira as well as others like Barnabas. Barnabas had given up at least some of his worldly assets by selling a field. He also showed trust in the church

leadership by handing over the cash raised to the apostles for their use in caring for the needy as they saw fit. In outward appearance, Ananias and Sapphira were doing exactly the same thing, but their attitude of heart was vastly different. As in all good situations, there was spiritual trouble coming. We must expect it. We can draw encouragement from the fact that the Jerusalem church continued to grow even after the events of this chapter. "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", Acts 6:7. God did not finish with the church because of this sin. If He did that, we would have to search long and hard to find any churches today! What Acts 5 does show us is that God is capable of purifying His church. Because nothing escapes His notice He knew what was hidden from the congregation. He could see Satan in Ananias' heart and He was well-aware of the secret plans of husband and wife. He revealed to Peter precisely what had happened. I am sure this was another consequence of the church's prayer for boldness, signs and wonders in Acts 4:29-30. Peter, who was filled with the Holy Spirit, 4:31, was more than a match for Ananias who had allowed Satan to fill his heart with deceitful lies. God is always more able than Satan. The man or woman of God today will always have the full resources of God Himself available when dealing with sin in the life of another.

Peter knew from his own experience how Satan would try to control a follower of Jesus Christ. When he rashly promised to follow Jesus into prison and even to death, Jesus said to him "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers", Luke 22:31 and 32. Peter denied any association with the Lord Jesus almost immediately. The look Jesus gave him

across the high priest's courtyard at the end of the evening broke his heart, verses 61 and 62. Peter wrote to Christians later "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings", 1 Peter 5 verses 8 and 9. The prayers of other believers, and our own self-control (discipline) will enable us to resist - oppose, withstand, thwart, remain unharmed by - the evil one. Of course it is difficult to know what action to take when a situation arises within a Christian congregation. It is hard to know when to be acting privately one to one and when to go public. The episode of Ananias and Sapphira shows us that public hypocrisy was dealt with publicly by God. It is also difficult to know when the truth is being openly told. In Acts 5 Peter seems to have received a word of knowledge from God. He was certainly led by the Holy Spirit directly to the root of the problem. Few church-discipline situations I have been involved with have been resolved as quickly and directly as this one. At times I have felt that a church with no people would have no problems, but I've never felt able to resort to a gun! Praise God there are principles in the Scripture that we must follow to be used by God in His purification of the church.

The Lord's supper, celebrated in various ways by different churches, should always include an opportunity of self-examination under the leading of the Holy Spirit. Paul told the Corinthians "A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup", 1 Corinthians 11:28, "For anyone who eats and drinks without recognising the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgement on himself", verse 29. The discerning or recognising of the body of the Lord is critical here. A person living in a sinful relationship, engaging in sinful business

practices, or holding a sinful resentment against another, is faced with a choice during this communion time of self-examination. He either deceives himself saying "I have no sin", or he confesses his sin and receives cleansing and forgiveness through the precious blood of Jesus Christ. A repentant heart immediately displays itself by forsaking that sin, giving it no further place in life. If this procedure is carried out regularly by congregations true Christian discipline is being encouraged. I have been celebrating the Lord's supper with large and small groups where reconciliation between members has occurred through the Holy Spirit's leading. People have made it right with one another, often with tears and hugs, before passing the bread and the wine on to the next person.

Jesus Christ made what I call 'the principle of the small circle' in settling differences. The New English Bible puts it well, "If your brother commits a sin, go and take the matter up with him strictly between yourselves, and if he listens to you, you have won your brother over," Matthew 18:15. The first steps of discipline are person to person in private. Paul advises similarly, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted", Galatians 6:1. Hopefully this will resolve the problem quickly and quietly. It may be that the person will be able to show a different perspective on the perceived sin which will allay any fears.

Alternatively the private warning shot across his bows may bring him to repentance before God: which is the object of the whole exercise. Jesus continued by saying a second visit should be made, this time with one or two other folk who can act as witnesses, if the smallest circle proved a stalemate. Perhaps God would use the influence of an appointment being made in this way to bring the person to their spiritual senses. Hopefully at the small group meeting

God the Holy Spirit will convict of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgement, John 16:8. If the person hears but still refuses to accept his fault, then Jesus said the right course of action is for the church as a whole to have one last attempt at making sense prevail. If that should fail, then the person should no longer be considered part of the fellowship.

If this whole procedure seems to be difficult to put into practice if you are in the right, remember it gives the one in the wrong a greater opportunity for repentance than Ananias and Sapphira had! Sapphira appears to have had one final opportunity of admitting their deceit when "Peter asked her, 'Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?' 'Yes' she said ' That is the price', Acts 5:8. She was true to her husband and their pact. God judged them both. They died at the apostles' feet. Sin always bring death. There would be no death if there was no sin. Individual Christians and Christian churches suffer spiritual death once they tolerate known sin. Campbell Morgan comments, "Either Ananias or the Holy Spirit had to go from the church."

Paul told the Corinthians, "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgements about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgement," 1 Corinthians 2:14 and 15.

God purifies His church but not in a savage way. He is not like some despotic governments that seek to "cleanse" their countries of certain tribes, religions or races. John 3:17 is one of my favourite sayings of Jesus Christ. "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him". These principles of self-examination and the small-circle settlement are

graciously designed by God to save us, to make us whole, to turn us into His own image. Satan is the enemy. He sows weeds among the wheat, Matthew 13:24-30. If both parties in a church disagreement realise that Satan is behind it, there is only one possible course of action. Pray together against the common enemy. Nothing will unite a church quicker than this.

Satan had quite a few attempts to enter the church in Acts. In chapter 5 he filled Ananias' heart. Remember only empty things can be filled. In chapter 6 he highlighted (and perhaps exaggerated) a careless distribution of aid and he managed to find people to grumble for him. In chapters 8 and 9 he breathed venomous fire at Christians through Saul. In chapter 20:28-31 Paul warned the Ephesian elders of wolves in sheep's clothing who will savage the flock of God under their care. The church at Corinth tolerated immorality among its members, it experienced believers taking other believers to court, it had groups lobbying for the theological lines of Paul, Apollos and Peter as well as the super-spiritual party of Christ alone! They criticised Paul for being too hard on them, too soft on others, too expensive in his lifestyle, too independent and self-sufficient. Their agape meals sometimes ended in drunkenness while the needs of the poor for food went unmet. The Corinthian Christians had little respect for the spiritual gifts someone else possessed, they were much more interested in vaunting their own gifts. And all this so soon after Acts 18! Satan loves to disrupt the building of the Christian church, but he is a defeated foe. Any Christians who live close enough to God for Him to share His heart with them will be able to see God keeping His church pure.

I remember challenging a fellow minister about sexual misconduct. Rumours had been circulating and as soon as I heard them I phoned to make an appointment

to see him, telling him over the phone what it was about. I went with an elder of a church and we were ushered into his office and confronted by this man and several other people. After asking if it was alright to speak openly in front of all these people I shared what I had heard and invited him to tell me that none of it was true. I said I was concerned for him, his wife, and the testimony of Jesus Christ in the area. Virtually everything was denied. My friend and I were threatened with legal action if we did not stop our investigations. I said we had only come as two Christian brothers and we were unaware of any sinister connotations from our perspective. We both expressed surprise at legal implications. In a short while the man closed his ministry and resigned some, at least, of his Christian associations. The outcome was not what I had sought. I had hoped there was no truth in the allegations. Next, I hoped on subsequent contacts there would be Holy Spirit led repentance. There was not. But God purified His church in that area. When similar stories arose from another area to which he had moved I prayed. What should I do? My phone rang with Christian leaders asking me to help them in making up their own minds. I tried to follow the scriptural principles that covered similar though not identical situations, "Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that others may take warning", 1 Timothy 5:19 and 20. God again defended His testimony.

This is not a pleasant subject. My mind is whirling over a few other examples where I have become involved in what is commonly referred to as church discipline. The Lord knows I am not without sin and can never throw any stones. But because I know "Jesus Christ the Righteous One is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world", 1 John

2:2, I can seek to bring people to his cross. I can ask them to consider the price He paid for their salvation and I can suggest there is nothing for which it is worth throwing all that away.

Discussion questions

* *What did Ananias and Sapphira do wrong?*

What do you think motivated them?

Why do we sometimes have similar problems?

* *Where do you draw the line between*

"accepting and praying for one another"

and confronting a matter in "a small circle"?

Chapter 9 **CHANGING CHURCH STRUCTURE** **Acts 6:1- 7**

In our terraced house in Redruth the only bathroom and toilet we have is downstairs. When the houses were originally built, more than one hundred years ago, there would only have been a privy in the garden. When Brenda and I moved there in 1987 we were able to redevelop the back of the house creating a modern kitchen and small sitting area which provided a proper link between the bathroom and the rest of the house. We considered trying to extend the first floor as well as the ground floor so as to include at least toilet facilities near the bedroom, but we were unable to. The reason was the foundations under the old kitchen and lean-to walls. The Local Authority building regulations pronounced these foundations were inadequate for a second storey and everything would need to be demolished and rebuilt on stronger foundations if we were to extend up above the ground floor.

The growth of a church is similarly enhanced or stifled by the foundational church-government structures. If one man can adequately pastor fifty people his congregation may increase as people see others being helped. That one man is then stretched to breaking point trying to pastor one hundred people in the same way as he pastored fifty. Since fifty people were his full-time occupation where can he find the extra time to care for double the number? Perhaps Christian ministers should have lessons from Joshua and Hezekiah on making the sun stand still or go backwards? There have to be easier ways!

The church in Jerusalem grew rapidly. In Acts 1:15 the believers could be counted at about 120; Acts 2:41 adds about 3000; Acts 4:4 reckons the number of men in the church to be 5000; by Acts 5:14 "nevertheless more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number". Acts 6:7 records the number of disciples living in Jerusalem increasing rapidly and including a large number of Jewish priests. With all these people in the fellowships it is no surprise there was room for complaints. In Acts 6 we are introduced to some of the growing pains of the church. "Murmurings" (KJV), "disagreements" (NEB) or "complaints" (NIV) all translate the lovely Greek word 'Gongusmos'. The implications of the word are that a lot of muttering was going on in private because the converts from a Greek background felt they were being discriminated against in favour of converts from a Hebrew background. The problem was not a sign of a lack of church growth, it was highlighted because the church was growing so fast. It had outgrown its structure. In Acts 1-5 the apostles carried almost all the burden of the church themselves. In Acts 6 they realised it could not go on that way. Perhaps one of them had read the story of Jethro visiting Moses in Exodus 18 as a quiet time reading. They certainly

seemed to heed the priest of Midian's wise counsel. Jethro said to his son-in-law Moses: "What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone ... select capable men from all the people - men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain - and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens", Exodus 18:17, 18, 21.

This problem surfaces in different ways. One church I pastored grew from a congregation of fifty to more than one hundred and fifty as God blessed the witness of the Christians in their everyday lives. Some folk who had been in the church for years were disappointed. "This fellowship used to be so friendly. We used to know everybody who came. Where did the friendliness go?" The answer was that the friendliness had not gone. It was practically more difficult for one person to get to know one hundred and forty-nine others. Some had enough problem remembering ten names correctly. In this fellowship the issue was complicated by holidaymakers who would swell the ranks. Our members did well at saying over coffee: "Welcome to Redruth Baptist today. May I ask where you come from?" Sometimes I was embarrassed, as others were, when the reply was: "Oh, I live in Redruth and have been coming regularly for the last three months!"

Growth pains are real. They are not easy to cope with. They are not, however, a sign that God has stopped working or that desperate measures need to be taken. A church that is planning to grow should prepare structures that will adequately cater for that growth, much like excited parents-to-be decorate the small bedroom and buy clothes, toys and a special bed in readiness for 'junior's' arrival.

From Acts we can learn some of the needs for change. There was an administrative need. An efficient organisation had to be set up to supervise fair distribution of the God-inspired community food programme, Acts 6:1. Also there was a ministry need. The Twelve had to ensure they remained available for their God-given preaching and praying ministry, Acts 6:2, 4.

No-one in the church disputed it. They all knew what the apostles were called to do and they were all going to make sure the apostles were enabled to keep doing it.

I think we can also see here a need for consolidation of the work. The Twelve did not want to lose their effective ministry amongst the recent Greek and Hebrew converts. Neither did they wish to hinder the expansion of their evangelistic preaching and teaching. They had to strike a balance between advancing and maintaining. Every bit of the ministry was God-initiated and so they needed to discover and implement His solution to the immediate crisis. Church leadership always needs to be governed by the needs of today, not the trust deeds or traditions of yesterday. Good foundations are to be built on. Weak foundations need to be superseded. Legitimate, but changing demands will require Holy Spirit led alterations to plans and patterns that have evolved through the centuries.

Some people argue "Just leave it to the Holy Spirit and He will sort things out. We need do nothing." What spiritual blindness! In Acts 6 it was the Holy Spirit who resolved the situation as He led the apostles to call a church meeting and as He impressed on the congregation the men He was selecting to serve in particular ways. God the Holy Spirit worked as the people addressed themselves to the problem. Paul and Barnabas brought consolidation to their later missionary

work in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch when they "appointed/ordained/had elders elected for them in each church, and with prayer and fasting committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust", Acts 14:23. They knew they could not personally remain in those towns so they initiated a basic structure under God that would enable His work to continue unhindered.

Acts 8:1 describes an event that demanded a change in church structure.

Suddenly the congregation was dispersed far and wide as a result of intense persecution. The Greek word for "scattered" comes from two other words meaning "to sow seed" and "throughout". God was helping the Christians to fulfil the Great Commission, but it stretched the mechanics of their church government. Only the small leadership group remained in Jerusalem. An army of Christians was planting Gospel seeds all over the other towns and villages. In Acts 11:22-26 the church had to respond to new openings God had brought about.

The leadership did not specifically tell anyone to go to Antioch and witness to every ethnic group, but some of the believers had seen a work of God drawing people to Himself as they did it. Barnabas was immediately dispatched to discover what was happening 300 miles away from the headquarters. True to his name Barnabas encouraged the things he could see had God's stamp of approval, even though they were not a pre-scheduled part of a five-year plan, nor had they ever been done anywhere before! Growth prompted change.

The young eldership of the Galatian churches appointed in Acts 14:21-28 was entrusted with the care of new converts although they did not have much experience themselves. Paul did not leave them entirely on their own. He made

several visits himself, and through his representatives, and he also wrote at least one teaching letter to them to help them combat traditional errors.

The apostles in Jerusalem did not attempt to lead the developing churches dictatorially. When Paul and Barnabas brought a delegation to their Council in Acts 15 the believers were seeking guidance over the place of Jewish rules in Christian fellowships. The clear recommendations given are an example of spiritual wisdom, tact and grace. The simple message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ never changes, but its practical application to a constantly changing world demands careful attention.

The key to success has more to do with the kind of people working within the structures than the structures themselves. Reading Acts 6 we benefit from the Twelve's stipulations over the prospective administrators of the church's feeding programme. The people who were selected and the principles of their selection make for interesting thinking and application to the church today: whether the church is looking for elders, housegroup leaders, children's work teachers, social workers or whoever. Why they chose seven we don't know, except it was obviously enough to share the responsibility without overburdening them. There were upwards of 5000 to choose from, Acts 4:4. They did not just appoint any old person who was willing to stand for the job. The positions were not given to special friends or family members. Nor was a wealthy man given the job to keep him on side. Every man had to show these five qualities:-

1. **They were local men.** Acts 6:3 begins, "Brothers, choose seven men from among you..." They had to be believers from the same environment as the congregation. They needed to be aware of the problem that had been happening and they should be in touch with the latest developments.

2. They were known men. These men must be "known to be" possessors of certain attributes we will discuss in a moment. They had to be men whose lives were open, men who were discerned to be true by the congregation. They were allowed no cupboards for skeletons to hide in. The way western news reporters and television journalists investigate public figures today verges on the criminal. In pursuit of 'the public's right to know' the individual is permitted very little privacy. People who serve in the church should have proven, attested, genuine and good characters. What they were prior to their conversion should not be held against them. The new creation in Christ is the one who is being of value in Christ's church.

3. They were spiritual men. If they were "full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom", they probably did not mention those facts themselves. A person who has to state his own attributes possesses them inadequately. One who is spiritually mature, or quickly maturing, is quite obvious to those around him. To be full of the Holy Spirit entails being emptied of selfish ambition, pride in position, lordliness and authoritarianism. Peter wrote later on, "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen". 1 Peter 4:10 and 11.

To be absolutely full of something means to be liable to overflow when moved! These men were to be overflowing with spiritual wisdom, discernment, counsel and grace.

4. They were responsible men. Acts 6:3 continues "...we will turn this responsibility over to them". The apostles were appointing these men to an important position of authority. J.B. Philips paraphrases their task as "to look after the accounts". The men were trustworthy in every respect. The apostles and the people had confidence in them. Because the Twelve were hoping to give them the job and leave it completely to them to manage, they had to choose men who would grasp any arising nettles. If they had to keep checking what their 'deacons' were doing the Twelve would still have had little time for prayer and Bible study.

5. They were men suited to this particular task. "this responsibility". Their appointment had a clear job description. Stephen, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas are all names indicating the men came from Gentile backgrounds. They were ideal for dealing with the Grecian Jews and their complaints. There was no cover up. They were humanly qualified, as well as spiritually qualified, for the job.

We all need to be where God wants us to be, doing what God wants us to do in the way He wants us to do. When we know we are doing what we are called to do, we know we can accomplish all that the task demands because He who calls also equips.

When God initiates change He will bring it about through men and women who are totally about His business. The apostles gave themselves sacrificially to prayer and the ministry of the word, Acts 6:4. They would allow no other priorities. The church of Jesus Christ would always have first call on their time. In united prayer they went to God on behalf of the people and then to the people on behalf of God. They engaged in spiritual warfare on their knees. The word of

God was given quality time as they learned in their studies and taught their Bible classes. Paul and Barnabas did similarly at Antioch in Acts 11:26. And to enable them to keep to these goals, the Twelve commissioned others to different vital ministries within the church, Acts 6:6. They had quickly taken the initiative in verse 2 and they were not slow in seeing it through to completion. Had they procrastinated the problem would have spread and they would have lost much more of their own precious time. The results of such leadership are thrilling. Acts 6:7 "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". Stephen, whom God was to use in such a special way among synagogue members and even the Sanhedrin, came into the ministry through this change in structure, Acts 6:8 and 9. Philip the evangelist who went to Samaria and was instrumental in starting the African church was given his first recognition, and opportunities. God works out His purpose as we are willing to change ourselves and our ways to conform to what He requires of us for today.

Just one more thought on this - what situations should motivate thinking about changing structures? In many conversations with non-Christians as I have ministered in England from house to house or in busy public places, I have discovered that a significant majority of people have rejected the church but they have not rejected God. If some of our church traditions and structures are barriers to the lost hearing the Gospel it is time we ventured out of our safety zones, sacrificed our own preferences, and shared Jesus Christ in His reality and relevance. Is there anything else in your community, other than church, that starts at 6pm? How many children are with the other half of their family only on Sundays? Is it therefore better to invite them for Christian instruction on a

different day? How much time does our church diary of events allow our members to simply befriend the lost folk round and about them? If people reject church it is not too serious. If people reject God because of church, something desperately needs changing.

Discussion questions

* *Share together some statistics.*

How many people are there in your fellowship?

How many people are you acquainted with?

How many people do you really know well?

Would small caring groups within the whole be beneficial?

* *How many leaders are there in your fellowship?*

How many jobs are you expecting each of them to do?

Is there a difference of status or only of role between administrative and ministry jobs?

* *Is 'survival' a sufficient motive for change or does Jesus give us another motive?*

Chapter 10 **KNOWING WHAT IS OF GOD Acts 8:9- 25; 16:6- 10**

One of Paul's prayers for the church is stated in Philippians 1:9-11. "And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ - to the glory and praise of God." To be able to discern what is best is a vital key to successful Christian living. How did these early Christians

know what God was telling them to do? How could they discriminate between a move of God and the enemy's action? The Greek word used by Paul to the Philippians is the same one John uses in

1 John 4:1 when he urges Christians to "test the spirits" rather than accepting that everything spiritual comes from God. It was a word used in the metal business for being able to detect real gold from fool's gold, the genuine article from the counterfeit. In John's letter, and in Paul's to the Philippians, the contexts point to the Holy Spirit's witness within the believer's heart being the acid test. A heart soaked in Scripture, moved with compassion, sensitive to the present situation and yet firmly fixed on the ultimate goal, will have a firm assurance from God concerning decisions made and actions taken.

As we survey the book of Acts there are dozens of occasions when the church was confronted with possibilities and needed to make choices. We are not told in the narrative precisely how they came to their conclusions although there are a number of clues we can follow which point us in the right direction. God does not usually hide His will from His children. Our Lord Jesus Christ gave us a triple promise that still remains absolutely reliable. "Ask and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you", Matthew 7:7. Our Father in heaven guides His children through the Holy Spirit He has placed within our hearts.

Immediately the Holy Spirit came to rest on the disciples at Pentecost He enabled them to interpret and explain events. When the crowd assembled trying to discover what was happening as the Galilean disciples declared God's wonders in languages intelligible to a whole variety of nationalities, Peter was in a position to be clear and precise. He explained that drunkenness was not the cause of this

event. Rather, "this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel" and he quotes Joel 2:28-32. Peter knew what God was doing as the Holy Spirit brought to his mind the prophecy of Joel and helped him to apply it to the day. Being with Jesus Christ regularly in the synagogues and listening to His teaching would have planted the seeds of truth into Peter's mind. Now God makes them grow. The seeds bear fruit. It is obvious that Scripture was uppermost in Peter's mind because he quotes from Joel 2, Psalm 16 and Psalm 110 in his sermon. He applies Joel to Pentecost and the Psalms to the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. This application of Scripture was to become a hallmark of his preaching. In Acts 3:24 he appeals to the message of Scripture from Samuel onwards through all of the prophets. He says they foretold current events. In Acts 4:11 he quotes another Psalm concerning the rejection of Jesus Christ by the Jews. By verse 25 the Christians are using Scriptures in prayer to give themselves confidence against their persecutors. Verse 31 clearly links together the fulness of the Holy Spirit and bold use of God's word. The writer of Acts, Dr Luke, drew attention at the close of his gospel to one of Jesus' priorities towards the end of his ministry. On the road to Emmaus he talked with two disciples who were discussing the events of the last few traumatic days. "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself," Luke 24:27. Back in Jerusalem's upper room Jesus joined the perplexed disciples and "He said to them, 'This is what I told you while I was still with you: everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms'. Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures," Luke 24:44, 45.

Obviously, one very important way to know what is of God is to develop a good working knowledge of the Bible. The Word of God makes us wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, 2 Timothy 3:15. It is the sword of the Holy Spirit, Ephesians 6:17. A good soldier would use his sword in both attack and defence. A growing Christian will learn to do the same with his Bible. The Bible is like an electric fence. It can keep in what it wants to keep inside the field and it can keep out what ought to be kept outside. And like an electric fence, the Bible is most effective when used in connection with the power supply. The Holy Spirit and the Holy Scriptures are a powerful combination.

As we look through a number of other examples of ways we can know what is of God and what is not, please remember this. None of these other occasions ever led the early church to do things, to accept things or to pursue things that were in any way contrary to the Scriptures. Since God speaks to us using the Bible, His word, it is certain that He will never contradict His word using any other way of speaking. Every time He speaks He concurs with Scripture. We will see in a moment that He may lead by a vision, He may lead through consensus of people, He may lead through a kind of spiritual hunch, He may lead through an investigative process, He may lead in other ways, but He will never go back on His word or go against His own revealed will.

In Acts 3:2-7 Peter knew God's will when the beggar asked him for money. He did not give the man what he asked for, but he gave him what he needed, in Jesus Christ's name. During sick visiting the saints of Lydda Peter again received a word from God in his spirit to pronounce healing on Aeneas. People turned to the Lord Jesus Christ (not to Peter) when the bedridden man could walk again, Acts 9:32-35. Luke records a specific time of prayer in Joppa before

Dorcas/Tabitha was raised from the dead through the very quiet and gentle words: "Tabitha, get up". Not even a mention of Jesus' name! Peter was learning that God gives discernment in every situation as to what He wants to be done. Only the man or woman who is living in obedience and openness to God's will can know and use this inside knowledge that God gives 13:9, 10. Paul knew it in Acts 14:9 and 28:8. Proverbs 1:5 says "Let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance." King Solomon himself had prayed at the beginning of his reign "Give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?"

1 Kings 3:9.

In Acts 5:3 Peter knew that Ananias was not speaking the truth, and similarly with Sapphira in verse 9. Notice that Peter had to act in faith, trusting God that the discernment given was true. Whether it was for healing the sick or confronting the hypocritical, discernment had to be given the visual monitor of faith in order to be seen to be true. In Acts 8:18-23 Peter discerned from the actions of Simon the sorcerer, that his heart was still inclined more for the power over people than the pure work of God. He wanted to buy the power of influence.

In Acts 15:9 we read that even Peter had problems knowing what God was doing. In Herod's prison and awaiting a similar execution to James, he was astonished by an angel leading him out of prison. (It had happened to him before, 5:19, 20, but he was still amazed and incredulous!) He was not sure whether it was a vision or a real event. Discernment is essential because it is not enough simply to read from the circumstances. James had been arrested like Peter. To follow just the same sequence of events, Peter would be executed too. But no! This

time God intervened to release his servant. He had more work for him to do before Peter would be granted rest in heaven. Another way the church knew God's will was by a consensus decision of the whole church body. In Acts 6 all the disciples were gathered by the Twelve and told to choose seven administrators for the food relief programme. We don't know if it was a vote or what precise method was used, but we do know it was a unanimous approval, verse 5 "this proposal pleased the whole group". Paul and Barnabas "appointed elders" or "had elders elected" in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch similarly.

There is no such decision recorded in the Bible about the plan to relocate everybody except the apostles outside of Jerusalem. It was simply an immediate response to the intense persecution stirred up by Saul, 8:1, 2. There was little time to call a meeting, pray and fast - a response had to be made individually and immediately. And God used that decision to spread the preaching of the Gospel. His will was being carried out. In Acts 8:14-17 and also 11:22 the church leadership hear of blessing on missions that they had not authorised. They exercise their responsibility by sending trustworthy men to investigate, to work alongside what is happening, and to eventually bring a report back. In the first instance, Peter and John confirm the work of evangelist Philip in Samaria. Peter and John used their gifts of Holy Spirit empowered teaching to encourage the converted Samaritans to receive the Holy Spirit, 8:17, and to learn the word of God, 8:25. In the second example, at Antioch, the investigator sent is Barnabas. His fourfold ministry is an example for us:-

1. He sees evidence of God at work, 11:23.
2. He encourages the people in their relationship with Jesus Christ, 11:23.
3. He keeps evangelising, 11:24.

4. He educates converts in Christian belief and Christian lifestyle 11:26.

The church as a whole, in Jerusalem and in Antioch, knew God's will through the spiritually sensitive men it sent to investigate what it had heard. Instead of making the church expand only in line with its own plan, the early church was spiritually alive enough to adapt its own plans and incorporate what God was doing through other people too.

In my ministry I have been in churches that are praying for God to work a mighty renewing revival. When things happen in a housegroup, in a nearby fellowship, in the youth work, they are not seen as the answer to prayer because they are not the precise way God has worked before. They were not the expected answer. Sadly, criticism and condemnation take the place of inspired investigation and often damaging splits occur where God was deliberately stretching his people. Other ways God led His people in Acts included speaking through angels, Acts 8:26, where an angel told Philip to leave the mission in Samaria in order to meet a man on the Gaza strip. Philip's obedience took the gospel into Africa. In Acts 9:10 God called Ananias in a vision to meet with Saul of Tarsus. One by one God answered Ananias' objections and his obedience led to the church's mission into Asia minor and Europe. In Acts 10:3-6 and 10:9-17 Cornelius and Peter are drawn together by God through a combination of visions, an angel, a trance and the voice of the Lord. Notice how the non-Christian Cornelius was led to invite into his home someone who could share Christ with him. Notice too, how Peter was led to do something he had never done before, going to a Gentile home, but it was a leading into the fulfilment of Scripture and not against Scripture, Acts 1:8, Matthew 28:18, 19. The confirmation for Peter was in verse 47 "Can anyone

keep these people from being baptised with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have."

The collective church was not entirely happy with Peter going to the Gentiles. They show us another way of knowing God's guidance in Acts chapter 11 and it is similarly repeated with Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15. In Acts 11:4 Peter gives an accurate testimony in the presence of those who are being critical of his actions. As he does so, God melts their objections away verse 18. It is a more formal Council set up in Acts 15 to hear Paul and Barnabas show that Mosaic law is unnecessary for Gentile converts to Christianity. In verses 6, 7 there is much discussion, with both sides having put their views, verses 4, 5. James draws the assembly to its conclusion verse 13 having listened to all sides and to the Holy Spirit too. The council carefully communicates its decision both in writing and with respected people who can explain and answer questions as to the meaning of the words. Verse 31 says the people were encouraged at what was shared, obviously witnessing God was at work.

There is a great danger in talking about different points of view only with people who agree with you. That fosters division, not unity. When everyone wants to know what God is doing and saying there need be no fear of open and honest sharing of testimony and debate on the application of Scripture. Mutual respect is often a prelude to mutual agreement. Even if the agreement is the lowest possible - "You go your way and I'll go mine" - agreement on that is infinitely preferable to ongoing acrimonious accusation and counter-accusation.

In Acts 11:27, 28 the church knew God's will through the prophet Agabus accurately predicting a future famine. (He also predicted Paul's Roman

imprisonment Acts 21:10, 11). The church took action in faith in sending a collection from their own resources to help alleviate suffering.

In Acts 13:2 the Holy Spirit spoke to the Antioch church leadership about mission as they fasted and prayed. Whether it was through the Bible, the word of a leader, a letter from someone in the congregation, or what, we don't know. But everyone there knew it was God who was speaking. Paul and Barnabas were released from one mission into another. However they did not always move on in such 'spiritually nice' circumstances. In 13:50 they moved on when "expelled" from Antioch in Pisidia. In 14:6 they "fled" from Iconium hearing of a plot to stone them. In 14:19-20 they were actually physically stoned before they left for Derbe. In 16:39-40 they were requested to leave Philippi by the town's officials. They kept one step ahead of Jewish agitators in Thessalonica, 17:10, and in Berea, 17:14. They changed direction because of another Jewish plot in Greece, 20:3. God's leading can come in a variety of ways, from the heavenly vision to the natural instinct for self-preservation. The important thing is to know and to do God's will.

In Acts 16:6, 7 Paul, Silas and Timothy were not allowed by the Holy Spirit to preach in Asia or Bithynia. It was obviously not God's time or they were not God's chosen instruments for that place. Their commission was clearly to go to every person in every place, but here God Himself said "Not now, not you". Galatians 5:25 says "Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit". Enthusiasm, while a great asset in Christian service, must be submitted to the Lordship of Christ day by day. Otherwise it can easily lead into the second-best and not God's best.

In Acts 17:2 there is a Biblical basis for doing something because you have always done it. "As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures."

Some years ago a young man came up and asked me how to go about testing a call he believed he had to the pastoral ministry. I encouraged him to share his testimony with me and then I advised him to explore Bible College possibilities through correspondence and phone calls, but also to keep working in his own fellowship. By volunteering to the leaders to do some pastoral visiting, some outreach with young people and some selected discipling under their direction the leaders could test his call with him. "Keep doing what you are doing and gradually expand it" I said. The man is excitedly pursuing God's will for his life now.

In Acts 18:1-3 Paul met with Aquila and Priscilla at Corinth and worked with them because he had similar skills. He was overcoming a long period of hard ministry before arriving there. After some witness to the Jews in the synagogue abuse drove him outside to go to those who would listen and receive his message, verse 6. God graciously confirmed this move, after he had made it, with a vision, verses 9-10. "Do not be afraid, keep on speaking; do not be silent. For I am with you, and no-one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city." Paul was given courage to continue by the assurance of the presence of Christ.

In Acts 18:20 Paul encountered one of the hardest tests in knowing and doing God's will. He was asked by God-fearing people to stay on and keep ministering to them in the Ephesian synagogue. It is so hard to say 'No'. I have known times when because it was a big organisation asking me to help, it would be easy to

say 'Yes'. I have known other times when because it would mean travelling to a wealthy country like America, it would be easy to say 'Yes'. I have also known times when I was asked to stay on in places even though God was calling me on. To say 'No' is hard, because it is great to be wanted. But to say 'No' is necessary because to be obedient is the only option for a true disciple of Jesus Christ.

Paul submitted to friends and officials and did not appear before the Ephesian mob even though he wanted to, Acts 19:30, 31. Yet, on another occasion, he insisted in going on to Jerusalem even though his team and the believers around all tried to persuade him otherwise, 21:12-14. I remember not becoming a Boys Brigade officer when everyone in my church, including my spiritual father, the B.B. captain, was sure it was what I should do. God led me into a ministry with a music group where I would give my testimony and help hump the gear in and out of their van. Through that I met Ambassadors For Christ evangelists and became aware of their training school. When I went to Katoomba, NSW, Australia I met my future wife, Brenda, and after completing the Bible College course we were invited back to Britain to become involved with the work of AFC in Britain, where we have served God since 1971. It all began by saying 'No' to everyone except to God.

Paul also used his spiritual common sense to warn the Ephesian elders about attacks on the fledgling church when he moved on, Acts 20:29,30. He did not need a special revelation, simply a review of what had happened elsewhere. His experience led him to give a solemn warning of what could be expected, to the men who had the ongoing responsibility.

In Acts 21:20-26 Paul ceremonially purified himself and his team in Jerusalem because godly men had shared with him that doing this would demolish one stumbling block to people hearing his message.

In Acts 23:6 Paul stirred up differences between Sanhedrin members by deliberate references to the resurrection. He knew one party would agree while another would not. He used this to his advantage. His guidance came through his knowledge of the parties arrayed against him.

Finally, when Paul was given a confirmation that he would testify in Rome, Acts 23:11, he took every step he could to get there - to help God's purpose along. He protected himself when he had news of a plot on his life, 23:17. He trusted himself to the Roman authorities believing God was using them to speed him to Rome, and he took every opportunity of sharing his testimony with people from governors to guards along the way. Even when the ship's captain ignored his advice in putting to sea from a Crete harbour, 27:10, Paul still retained absolute confidence in God taking him on to Rome unscathed, 27:25.

Our Lord Jesus Christ said "All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you", John 16:15. The Spirit speaks to us in many ways, as we have seen, but never in a way that contradicts His own word. Keep your ears listening to God.

Discussion questions

** If 'spiritual' can be of God or of Satan, how can we distinguish between God's leading, God's restraining and Satan's temptation?*

** Does "circumstances*

+ a *Word*

+ a *prophecy*

+ *spiritual logic*

= *guidance*"

If not, is there another equation?

** Why is 'No' sometimes very hard to say, but necessary to be obedient?*

Chapter 11 **SPEAKING PERSONALLY FOR CHRIST Acts 8:26- 40**

In witnessing for the Lord Jesus Christ two things are of paramount importance.

The first is that the individual Christian is living in the Spirit and the second is that God is working by His spirit in the person being witnessed to. They are both illustrated here in this story of Acts 8:26-40. As we work through it we will see, to begin with, six ways Philip was living and moving in the Holy Spirit of God. Then we will see five ways in which God was working in the Ethiopian eunuch to whom Philip had the chance to witness.

It is likely that this encounter was the first time an African had heard the Gospel and believed.

Jesus had said much earlier that the disciples would receive "power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses" 1:8. Philip was a man in whom the fulness of God's Holy Spirit, could be seen, 6:3 and 5. He was "known to be full of the Holy Spirit". It must be a constant prayer for us to know

the continuing blessing of God the Holy Spirit in and on our lives. These six subsequent happenings show why.

1. Philip was listening to the Holy Spirit, 8:26. God spoke directly to him, and Philip heard him. It was through an angel that God spoke. The command was to "Go". To obey would mean both action and movement. It was specifically to "Go south". That was against human logic and reason. Why should Philip leave a successful mission and go into the desert? But that was what God said, and he must obey. The church needs Christians who are listening to God's voice today, whether it is through an angel, through a human messenger, by a sermon, in a circumstance, or in regular daily Bible reading, we must hear Him.

If Philip had not listened, none of the rest would have happened. Jesus often said "He who has ears to hear let him hear what the Spirit says ... to the churches". Revelation 2:7, etc.

It is often good to ask a Christian congregation what they believe God is saying to them. What is He asking them to do? What challenge is He putting before them? In our Schools of Evangelism in Cornwall we usually give 2 or 3 "The Answer" tracts to the students. Having taught them to go through it with someone, we pray and trust God to put on to our hearts how we can use them during the course. Students have been so encouraged to see themselves being used by God. One farmer from near Liskeard actually gave away nearly fifty during a School, every one with a good word of personal witness. He prayed with several people to trust Christ.

2. Philip was walking in the Spirit, 8:27. "So he started out". A walk begins with a step. It may be a tottering, staggering, unsteady step - holding on to something else for extra balance to start with like a toddler learning to walk.

But it will lead to another step and another, until a lot of ground is covered in the end. Don't expect big things too soon and don't be disappointed too easily either. In Romans 8 Paul says: "those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God", Romans 8:14. Someone walking can be led. Someone not walking can be advised - but gets nowhere until he moves. A son has the Father's characteristics in him - he shows he has learned from and about his Father. As Jesus was always about his Father's business so should we be, whatever else we are doing and wherever we are. Are you walking with the Holy Spirit? It was "on his way" Acts 8:27, he met the man he led to Christ. Are you on your way?

3. Philip was keeping in step with the Spirit, 8:29. It would not have been enough just to have gone to the desert road. That was one step of obedience, but only one step. Had he stayed there by the roadside and purely watched this chariot go by, he would have been close to God's will, but not in it. And the Ethiopian would have stayed lost. The same Holy Spirit who told him through the angel to go south, now said "Go to that chariot and stay near it". In other words God was saying "Well done. Now move to continue what I have started". It was a specific command " - go to that chariot". He was going to be required there for a while "and stay near it". Keep going and stick at it.

It is the people that I have lived amongst for a while that pose the greatest challenge to me in personal evangelism. It is relatively easy to talk to someone you don't know and are never likely to see again. But the people we can spend a lot of time with over weeks and even years, are those who see us live out our Christianity. They watch us through the ups and downs of life. How do we know when God is telling us to speak more directly to them about Jesus Christ? I have found that as I pray for an opportunity with a particular person so God brings it

about. One elderly man who lives near my office stopped me in the street and asked me about what I had written in the local newspaper. An ex-neighbour couple called me for help when their father was dying. Some of my fellow school governors have asked me what I believe and why. Every time these opportunities arise I can share something of Jesus Christ if I am walking in the Holy Spirit.

Galatians 5:25 says "Since we live by the Spirit, let's keep in step with the Spirit". Are you still in step with God? Are you completing what He started in and with you? Don't be proud and complacent about yesterday's achievements.

4. Philip was using the sword of the Spirit, 8:30-33. His witness was based on God's authority and not on his own. He made good use of the Bible which was seen to be God's word. We are always looking for the conviction of God to come upon the sinner. That conviction is spiritual and is the work of the Holy Spirit. No-one can be argued into or out of conviction by the Holy Spirit of God. Ephesians 6:17, 18 tie together two important things: "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" and "pray in the Spirit on all occasions". Paul encourages the personal worker to use God's word and to light the touch paper with his spiritual praying for the people he is witnessing to.

Philip began where the Ethiopian was (another lesson for us in witness) and it was obvious that he himself had an understanding of Scripture. When the eunuch begged for instruction - Philip gave it to him.

I remember a couple coming to dinner with Brenda and me. The wife was a believer and the husband was not. We went for an after dinner walk along the beautiful Atlantic Coast. The ladies were in front and I was chatting to this man about cars. Now I have virtually no interest in cars and even less knowledge about them. But this chap was very much into cars and so I began where he was

- and listened politely. After quite a long while he said "I appreciate this conversation, and I must say I'm very grateful that you haven't buttonholed me about God. I thought you'd try to convert me." From that moment on, by asking him what he meant, by showing him what the Bible said about conversion and by sharing my own testimony this man was under the influence of the sword of the Spirit. He is now a lovely born again believer with a call to be a Christian in business.

Are you ready to be an instrument like Philip in God's hands? Are you ready to use the sword? Are you ready because you have prepared by getting a reasonable grasp of God's word?

5. Philip was following the mission of the Spirit, 8:35. "He began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus." Jesus had said, John 14:26, "the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you." John 16:8 "He will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgement." John 16:14 "He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you."

Pushing yourself or your church is not the Holy Spirit's mission. He will "push" only Jesus. Do you follow Him on His mission? Even building bridges between Christians and non-Christians is of no value unless you cross the bridge and bring those people back with you - into the Kingdom of God. A bridge never saved anyone: Jesus Christ alone saves.

6. Philip was bringing assurance in the Spirit, 8:36-39. Philip led this Ethiopian man to a place where he was committed to Christ - as evidenced by his baptism by immersion as a believer. Even if verse 37 is suspect, and does not

appear in all Bible versions, it is obvious from the fact the African was baptised, that he was committed to Jesus Christ. Whatever form it took, whatever words were used, he raised up a new flag over his life, the flag of Jesus' cross. Verse 39 says "(he) went on his way rejoicing". He was happy as he knew his sins were forgiven and he began a personal walk with God in the Spirit through Jesus. Joy is one of the Holy Spirit's fruits. Make it your aim to lead people right through to a full experience of joy as a Christian. Do not be content with a number of decisions only. Real evangelism leads to new Christians being solidly cemented into God's building as living stones. We don't want isolated stones that easily move away from the right place and are lost to the building.

Romans 8:16 "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children". Bring people to this point to see them really saved and trust God to continue His work in their lives.

So we have seen six ways the personal evangelist can speak effectively to people about Christ:

- by listening to the Holy Spirit
- by walking in the Spirit
- by keeping in step with the Spirit
- by using the sword of the Spirit
- by following the mission of the Spirit
- and by bringing the assurance of the Spirit

It is as we work for God that God Himself works with us. The real blessing of this can only be learned by experience. The church I pastored in Ascot decided to visit the village house by house over a year. We prayed God would lead us to

people in whom He was working. The schedule for visitation got further and further delayed as we found more and more people wanted to talk about Christian things. If we had not gone door to door we would never have discovered how God was answering our prayers in so many people. Many congregations do not go because they say, "people don't want to know about Christ". The truth is that Christians don't want to go and tell folk!

The activity of God is what we count on in our witnessing. We can only tune in to it by prayer and by walking in the Spirit. These five activities are always true and can be relied upon:

1. **God had a plan, Acts 8:26, 27.** He spoke to Philip and "on his way", in response, God drew Philip into the plan. It could all have stopped if Philip was too busy to listen.
2. **God had a person, 8:27, 28.** "on his way" home! God, who knows everything, planned for an evangelist to meet a ready heart in the middle of a boring desert - where there was plenty of time to talk!
3. **God had prepared that person, 8:28-31.** The eunuch wanted to worship God, he wanted to understand the Scripture, and he was open to good teaching. The Spirit of God was already active in that man's life.
4. **God had provided His word, 8:32-33.** This prophecy of Jesus as the Lamb of God was part of the way God chose to speak to the Ethiopian. His inspired word always has a place in the forefront of evangelism. He has given it to us, and we should use it. Evangelism without the Bible is like a gun with no ammunition. It may look the part but it will never achieve anything.
5. **God's purpose was worked out, 8:36-39.** His plan, for these two men, was fulfilled. Philip led the Ethiopian to Christ. Then he was whisked off

elsewhere by God. The Eunuch rejoiced as he journeyed home, because he had sought and found, God.

We put ourselves into the middle of God working out His will by praying in, following after, and being led by, the Holy Spirit of God.

By faith, go on your way this week - and lead someone towards Christ.

By faith, pray and see God at work.

God will use you to your own blessing, in fulfilling His purposes for other people too.

This incident is not an isolated one in the book of Acts, although it may be the most detailed. Acts 10 details how God prepared both Peter and Cornelius for an encounter that resulted in Cornelius' household being saved.

Acts 16:13-15 we see how God brought both Paul and Lydia to the right place at the right time for another family conversion. These happenings enforce my belief that it is a partnership between prayer and personal evangelism that brings people to Christ. Either without the other is less than God intends. Let us make sure we use all our own abilities in conjunction with all of God's enabling to reach to people around and about us for Jesus Christ.

Discussion questions

* *What is the next step God is asking you to take*

- *as an individual?*

- *as a fellowship?*

* *Think of a situation where you would like to speak for Christ.*

Decide on a small but specific opportunity.

Share in the group and pray for each other.

Pray for each other every day and watch for that opportunity.

Take it.

** How can a fellowship "solidly cement" new Christians into God's building? Be specific in the context of your fellowship.*

Chapter 12 **MEETING PEOPLE CHRIST HAS CHANGED**

Acts 9:10- 28; 22:12- 16

When a baby joins a family the family changes. The parents in particular and any older brothers or sisters, all have to adapt to the new life who has been entrusted to them. The demands of the youngster are put first because he cannot yet be reasoned with like the others. Parents make sure his needs are met in the best way they possibly can. They also find themselves severely embarrassed sometimes by the spills and smells of their new baby - who appears to have no sense of occasion!

When people are born again and join the Christian family it is essential that the existing Christian family provides all it possibly can to welcome and to nurture these new disciples. It is not always easy but it is essential.

One event that made a real impression on me was when some elderly ladies prayed in a prayer meeting at Blackheath Baptist in Australia. The church had had an influx of young adults and it was a great answer to prayer. But these folk did not know how to behave in church. They would get up and walk around, sit with their feet on the pew in front, sit when others were standing and shout questions or comments to the preacher during his sermon. This one prayer meeting though, impressed me because these older saints prayed "Lord, we don't like what these people do, how they dress, their bad language and rudeness, but

we know you love them and we want you to help us accept them as they are."

Gradually some were converted from the group, others lost interest, and over the months the situation calmed down. What a prayer! When we pray for converts do we put restrictions on God? Must they be from our race, our tribe, our social status, must they be 'normal' families with no messy divorces or criminal ties?

Unfortunately all these things can make us have a wrong attitude to accepting into the church everybody God draws to Himself.

If the Jerusalem church had a problem between races, the Greek speaking Jews and the Hebraic Jews of Acts 6:1, it is not surprising that Christian churches over the years have had problems accepting blacks in America and South Africa, accepting Asians from Pakistan or India in England, accepting tribal people in the Arab dominated churches of Khartoum. I have always thought it a pity that different tribes and people of different ethnic origins meet for worship as separate groups, even though our own Ambassadors For Christ ministry has encouraged it in Britain with Rev S H Massey's God-given vision of Asian Christian Fellowships in many towns and cities. Language differences do give one obvious reason, but I feel every effort should be made to show that Christians genuinely are all one in Christ Jesus.

Now for a moment I want you to think of the most unlikely person you know, who is alive and in your sphere of influence today, who is most unlikely to become a born again believer. Perhaps he is of another religion and he knows all the answers. Perhaps he is aggressively self-assertive and utterly intolerant of any other faiths. Perhaps he has the civic authorities on his side and has already done much harm to the Christian cause. Once you have thought of him (or her!) pray for him. Pray for his conversion. Then imagine you receive a phone call or

a letter in a few weeks to say "please come and meet this person because God wants you to be his mouthpiece in affirming them in their new found faith." How easily would you go? How many excuses could you find? What would it take to convince you that God really had done a genuine work of salvation in his life?

The name Ananias means 'God is gracious'. I don't expect the disciple of that name in Acts 9:10-19 agreed with the definition when he was called to visit Saul of Tarsus. Saul was a man of some reputation, and all of it bad news for Christians. He was the instigator of the "great persecution that broke out against the church at Jerusalem" Acts 8:2. His personal role is described in verse 3 "Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison." He "was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples" when he obtained letters of authority to extend his vicious work to Damascus, 9:2.

You and I both know what happened in Acts 9:3-9. We know how Saul was confronted by the risen Lord Jesus, convicted of his own sin, and converted to being a disciple of Jesus Christ. But Ananias did not know that. He could have heard a rumour from someone who thought he may have seen Saul being led by the hand into Damascus, but he had no concrete evidence. Then God called him by name. "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,"

Acts 9:10-12.

Six qualities in Ananias' life made him usable to God at this point. His role was simply to confirm the call of God to this one new convert and to point him in the

direction of future service. If Ananias had made a mess of it however, you could rip out chunks of your New Testament because they would not have been written. There would have been no church at Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe etc. The narrative of Acts would have ended at roughly chapter 12. The cause of Christ is immensely indebted to Ananias who went to meet a man Christ had changed.

How can we be useful to God in this sphere? We may have to take risks for ourselves and for our families. I know of Christians in the Arab world who have paid with their own freedom for trying to help converts from Islam. In my own churches there have been immense demands made on myself and my family when the teenage daughter of a family going through a bitter divorce became a Christian and came to stay. She came for one night and stayed eighteen months. There was a man with bleeding wounds to his eyes and mouth who turned up on the doorstep and said "Can you hide me because they're trying to do me in?" There have been people with mental difficulties, with criminal backgrounds including paedophiles. What does Ananias teach us about how to be useful to God?

- 1. He was a disciple, Acts 9:10.** He himself was a man who had heard the call of Jesus Christ and had come to Him and was now seeking to carry a daily cross, Luke 9:23, Luke 14:26.
- 2. He was a devout man, Acts 22:12.** He was a pious, reverent, sincere and earnest man who was loyal to the law of the Lord and who loved the Lord of the law.

3. He had a good reputation, Acts 22:12. Other people inside and outside the Christian church could tell he was genuine. He gained their respect by the reality of his daily walk with God.

4. He was calm enough to hear God's call, Acts 9:10. He was close enough to God to listen and learn what God wanted him to do. It was a vision, literally "an appearance, that which is seen", that came to a disciple. The message was more important than the medium used. Ananias was less aware of the room where he was and life's present circumstance. He was more aware of sights and words implanted into him by God Himself.

5. He was willing to overcome his own reticence, Acts 9:13-16. Having expressed his personal questions to God he accepted God's answers. He overcame his own statement 'I am unsure' with a resounding 'I am willing'.

6. He was faithful in doing what God told him, Acts 9:17. We can see that he laid hands on Saul, prayed for him, and told him what God had revealed about the future plans for his life, Acts 22:14-16. He challenged him towards believers baptism too.

We must be available for God to use us in parenting new Christians. Just as parents of human babies will only leave their children in a crèche properly staffed and prepared, I am convinced that God entrusts spiritual babies to those who have taken on this responsibility seriously.

Perhaps we should notice in passing the three things that nearly stopped him from being usable by God. Firstly, there were the things he had heard from others, 9:13, linked with an obvious personal fear for his own safety. Secondly, Ananias was unaware of God's plan for Saul's life, compare 9:13 and 9:15. Once God had shared His overall purpose, doing the task assigned became easier.

Thirdly there was the danger of only going on outward appearances. He initially saw everything from a human perspective. He ultimately viewed the situation from a heavenly perspective and it changed his own actions. Ananias took six steps of faith: he listened to God, Acts 9:10; he went to the house and entered the house, 9:17; he placed his hands on Saul 9:17; he told Saul what God had told him was in store, 22:14, 15; he challenged Saul to be baptised, 22:16.

Now, of course, visiting Saul on behalf of the church was only the beginning. Saul had to be introduced to the church back in Jerusalem so that they could accept him and attest to what God had done. Acts 9:26 says "when he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple". At least several weeks had gone by since his Damascus Road experience and news must surely have filtered back to the apostles. But even these greatly used servants of God were sceptical of his testimony. Of course, they all knew families bereaved by Saul's murderous activities and perhaps the bitterness of some of them made a powerful lobby to give Saul the cold shoulder. So God raised up another man to keep His work on track. Verse 27 "But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus". Barnabas went out of his way to welcome Saul. Just suppose he had been wrong. If he had introduced Saul to the meeting place and to all the key figures of the church and Saul had then thrown off his disguise of conversion and arrested them all, Barnabas would have been a name spat rather than spoken! Barnabas risked his own reputation. He did five wonderful things for Saul. Paul was what he was because Barnabas helped him. Thank God for Barnabas.

1. **Barnabas accepted Saul as from God, compare Acts 9:26, 27.** When everyone else was going by what they had heard and remaining afraid of Saul, Barnabas was actually going to meet Saul to find out for himself.
2. **Barnabas introduced Saul to the church.** He believed the best about Saul, not the worst. Romans 15:7 "Accept one another then, just as Christ accepted you in order to bring praise to God." He did not hold his past against him, Colossians 3:13, "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."
3. **Barnabas was mindful of Saul, Acts 11:25,** even though several years had gone by he was still concerned that Saul's calling and potential were realised.
4. **Barnabas shared his own ministry with Saul, Acts 11:26.** There was a large number of young uninstructed believers in Antioch and for a year Saul and Barnabas taught them all they could. The older Christian gave ample opportunity for the young Christian to find his feet.
5. **Barnabas teamed up with Saul on missionary service, Acts 13:1-3.** He saw Saul right through from the elementary Bible class to being a missionary planting churches everywhere he possibly could. All of this could have been stopped if Barnabas had not persistently knocked on the closed door of the Jerusalem church with one hand while holding firmly to Saul with the other. Aquila and Priscilla give yet another example of this in Ephesus, Acts 18:24-28. The Egyptian Apollos came to Ephesus and, although he was an enthusiastic teacher of some truth, it was evident to Aquila and Priscilla that something was missing from his experience. Rather than stand back and criticise, as some would have done, this couple opened their home, their hearts and gave their help to the itinerant preacher. Apollos learned well. When the

time came to move on he went with a letter of commendation to the church in Achaia.

A Christian church must welcome newcomers, whether newly converted or somewhat lacking in understanding and experience. If the church is to do it, you and I must do it because we are the church. We know God is still at work in our own lives, transforming us more and more into the image of Christ. We are probably ashamed now of some of the things we did, or we championed, in the past. Thank God people accepted us as we were and loved us into maturity. Let's make sure we do the same for others now.

Discussion questions

** Think through what obedience means in your relationship with God.*

Share what obedience meant to Ananias.

** Think of an attitude or action you personally find vile or horrific.*

Someone you have come to respect shares their testimony.

He/She did that terrible thing!

Share how you would react.

** Think through the new situation you face, as their friend in Christ.*

Chapter 13 **ACCEPTING GOD'S WORK FOR YOU TO DO** Acts 10

The New Testament church had problems with bringing new converts from different races into their fellowship. Prejudices that build up over many years do not disappear immediately. Even if a variety of people are converted and do join

the church that still does not resolve these issues. Acts 6:1 reveals groups within the one church, powerful lobbies representing one party's interests against the others. It happens everywhere even today.

I was at a church recently where a group of visitors came to join the morning service, stay for lunch and attend the afternoon workshop. There were about fifteen visitors and approximately twenty in the regular congregation. Everyone was white and English, coming from two towns about five miles apart. Over lunch there were two camps sitting on either side of the hall! With just a couple of exceptions people preferred the folk they knew to the ones they did not - although they could not make a real judgement because they had never actually tried to relate to the others. Brenda and I only knew a couple of people in both groups and we had quite a quiet lunch except when we made the effort to go and mix with others.

Perhaps there is a key. It takes an effort to break down the "I don't know you" barrier. It runs the risk of rejection. It runs the risk of being misconstrued - "I wonder what he is after?" We do all prefer to remain comfortably with our known friends, but where does that put newcomers, especially those whose culture and lifestyle is quite different from ours?

In Acts 10, and especially verses 9-20, Peter learns a valuable lesson that we must learn too. Peter was an experienced church leader. He was there in Acts 1:8 when the disciples were told they would be witnesses for Jesus Christ. He knew the promise Jesus had given. He experienced the power of the Holy Spirit on his life and ministry. He had brought his own life into line with the purpose of God, to win the lost world back into a saving relationship with the living God.

Over a few years he had been in the forefront of witnessing: he was the

spokesman on the day of Pentecost, Acts 2:14, he took the initiative when the lame beggar was healed by the temple, Acts 3:16, he testified boldly before the Sanhedrin, Acts 4:10, and there were many other times the church followed Peter's lead. Yet he still did not know all about evangelism and God used this time when he was drawn aside to teach him the next step of obedience.

Peter was always a man of prayer. That helped in keeping him open to what God wanted for him. He prayed before Pentecost, Acts 1:14, he regularly prayed at the temple, Acts 3:1, he prayed when the church was persecuted, Acts 4:31, he prayed as leadership was delegated, Acts 6:4, he prayed with the dead body of Dorcas before she arose, Acts 9:40. Now, in Acts 10:9 he is having a pre-lunch prayer time on the roof of Simon the tanner's house by the sea. God was going to show him that there were people outside of his own Jewish background who were open to the movement of God's Spirit and that Peter would have a God-given opportunity to get in amongst them.

I like Acts 10:10 because it gives me biblical warrant for feeling hungry and wanting something to eat! Peter's appetite was a key part in this lesson too. In the trance he fell into, (the Greek EKSTASIS being a condition in which ordinary consciousness and the perception of natural circumstances were withheld, making the soul susceptible only to the vision implanted by God), God used his hunger to test his resolve in keeping to the strict Jewish eating laws. A sheet was lowered from heaven with "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." Acts 10:12, 13. Peter refused. All his upbringing, his knowledge, the way God had used him to date, told him that he could not eat these 'unclean' meats, those prohibited in the Jewish Levitical laws.

Notice Peter knew his Bible, Acts 10:14. He called these creatures 'unclean' on the basis of Leviticus 11:4-8 etc. Peter also knew his Lord's voice, Acts 10:14 he says "surely not, Lord!" He knew himself too. He was plunged into deep thought and meditation by this whole incident. Why would God tell him to do things God's own law had proscribed? Was he mistaking God's voice? Had he misunderstood the Scripture? Was God testing him to see if his human appetite would overcome his Jewish principles?

I have mentioned earlier in this book that God guides us in different ways but never in contradiction to His own word. Here is an example of God leading a man from a specifically Jewish interpretation of God's law into a specifically Christian understanding. Peter had brought with him into his Christianity a great deal of non-Christian, pre-Christian, understanding. He was now having to unlearn those things before he could make any further progress.

With all his experience in being used by God Peter was still teachable. That is a big mark in his favour. So many of us when we have been used in particular ways gradually become entrenched in those ways. We do the same things again and again, with less and less effectiveness if we are honest, but we keep going because God has blessed this way in the past.

Many Christians I know find their church systems and structures a real hindrance to modern evangelism and discipleship. More recently we have been encouraging Christians with evangelistic hearts to reach out to the lost in parallel with their church. We suggest they do not work in competition with a church whose meetings and methods are unhelpful, but rather work as a complement to it. Several have started homegroups to pray for the area, midweek, and on a different night to the meeting of the church (if there is one). Then by using

homes, meals, fun evenings, children's clubs or whatever they have won friends and neighbours to Christ. Others in the church who have the vision to join in do so, those that don't, don't! Once there are some new believers nurture must take place. Again this can happen in homes or in the church if it is suitable. Sunday after church service, or midweek evenings are both good times. If the new believers pray, worship, learn from the Bible and occasionally break bread in their nurture groups, who is to say they are not in church, whether they actually go to a traditional Sunday church or not? According to the New Testament church is people not premises, church is a body not a building, and church is helpful towards Christian growth, not a hindrance.

After Peter's pondering of the vision, God the Holy Spirit gave him a word of knowledge, Acts 10:19, 20. "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." These were the men from Cornelius. Cornelius was a centurion, a non-commissioned officer in charge of one hundred men, members of the Roman occupying forces. The barracks where he was based in Caesarea were a noted trouble spot because of frequent hostilities between Jews and Gentiles.

Cornelius was notable for four characteristics:

- 1. He was a responsible man, in his work and his family, 10:1, 2.**
- 2. He was respected by those around him, 10:22.**
- 3. He was religious, 10:2.**
- 4. He was ready to do anything to know God better, 10:7, 8.**

We could add that he would have been rejected by the early Jewish Christians from a close intimate fellowship, because he was an 'unclean Gentile'.

So God prepared Peter for a complete change of direction in his ministry. The last four words of the Spirit must have been ringing in Peter's ears as he went to meet the men from Cornelius. "I have sent them." They requested Peter go with them to the Roman soldier's home. Peter knew he would get severe criticism from many of his own people for going (and he was right, Acts 11:2). But the Holy Spirit had said "I have sent them." Peter had to choose whether to go along with God or to go along with the traditional crowd in the church. That is a very hard choice when you face it in practice. One hundred times more difficult than when you face it in simple theory.

Full credit to Peter that he went forward:

- 1. He made himself available for God to use, Acts 10:23** "...the next day Peter started out with them and some of the brothers from Joppa went along."
- 2. He was aware he was nobody special.** When Cornelius fell at his feet he instantly, Acts 10:26, "Made him get up. 'Stand up', he said, 'I am only a man myself.'" He did not let being God's leader doing a new thing go to his head.
- 3. He was an ambassador for Jesus Christ.** When you read Peter's sermon to Cornelius' household from Acts 10:34-43, notice how he centred in on Jesus Christ. 'God was with Jesus. We are witnesses of everything he did. People killed him on a cross. But God raised him from the dead. He commanded us to preach.' Peter had every confidence that before all these Gentiles he could preach the life-changing Gospel of Jesus Christ.
- 4. Peter was amazed at what God did, Acts 10:44,** "While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message." The Christian Jews were astounded that God could bless these now Christian Gentiles in exactly the same way as He had blessed them. That showed their

initial prejudice. It also showed their instant partnership from then on. They were going to work together, Jews, Gentiles and God, to bear witness that in the Christian church there are no racial distinctions.

As Paul was to later write "For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body - whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free - and we were all given the one Spirit to drink" 1 Corinthians 12:13.

A friend of mine was in a church where I was preaching. I used the words of Jesus to Paul in Acts 9:6. "Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do." God lodged those words into his heart in such a way that he went on to become a London City Missionary. It was not the only step in his call, but it was a very real step. Maybe God will use this chapter to help make clear to you His next step for your life.

Discussion questions

** Is it possible to walk into your fellowship and out again without being welcomed?*

Are you self-centred as a fellowship?

** If everyone in your fellowship reached out in their street, in the school, in their job - share how many different parts of the community would be reached?*

List them out.

** How can you grow in your Christian faith and reach out to people who don't know Jesus?*

**Do you think you would be seen by other Christians as too different and – perhaps - forsaking the meetings of Christians?*

Chapter 14 **SEEING BEYOND YOUR OWN WORK Acts 11:19- 29, 13:1- 3**

Jesus Christ always encouraged his disciples to have a vision for the whole world and not just for their own work. In John 4:35 He tells them "Do you not say four months more and then the harvest? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest." He was condemning people who would always postpone the work until later. He was criticising people who were so blinkered into tunnel vision for their own field of service that they never noticed the world-wide harvest that Jesus Himself was interested in. He was calling attention to the readiness of people to trust Him now, if only they knew what He had to offer them.

Again in Acts 1:8 Jesus channelled the disciples from where they were, in "Jerusalem", to where they could be, "the ends of the earth". The early disciples did catch a vision beyond themselves. They did not always progress as voluntarily as they should have done, but various events do show us the direction in which they were pointing.

In Acts 2:39 Peter has a vision for subsequent generations, an often neglected field, when he says to the Jerusalem crowd "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are afar off - for all whom the Lord our God will call."

Have you ever considered writing your Christian testimony and faith down so that future generations in your family can 'hear' your witness?

In Acts 5:14-16 the church's influence spreads out from Jerusalem to the surrounding towns as people hear what is going on and want to discover for themselves. Every congregation should see itself as its own "Jerusalem". Then it should adopt other areas as its own "Judea", say surrounding and similar peoples, its own "Samaria", nearby people of different culture and ethnic groupings, and "the ends of the earth", perhaps a missionary or national church in every one of the continents of the world that could be partners in Christian outreach.

In Acts 8 verses 4, 5 there is a relevant example to the travelling Christian public of today. "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went." Major airports give an opportunity to reach people from all over the world. Railway stations and bus termini are focal points for many people from other cities, towns or villages. I am writing this chapter in St Ives, a very popular Cornish holiday town. In one summer here several hundred different cities, towns and villages of England, as well as various European and people of other nationalities could be reached for Jesus Christ simply by talking to the individuals who make up the crowds on the harbour side. If we can travel then we can speak to people wherever we are. If we cannot travel we can speak to everybody who comes to us. Paul is an example of the latter, Acts 28:30 and 31.

In Acts 8:25 Peter and John took an opportunity to share the gospel in the many villages in between Samaria and Jerusalem. They had been sent to validate Philip's ministry in Samaria. Having done that they used their journey home to good effect, stopping off to preach where they could. In 1991

I travelled with a Sudanese evangelist from Khartoum to Atbara by bus and by lorry. We broke down twice, which was disconcerting when there had been nothing but sand to see for hour after hour! However the mechanic who was carried for such emergencies was able to mend our elderly vehicle each time and we eventually reached our destination. The ride was very hot, very jarring on the body as the bus leapt about on the ruts and ridges, and very dangerous as my head kept hitting the luggage rack (though fortunately my face avoided the broken steel chair-back in front of me). But what impressed me most of the journey was a conversation with my elderly Christian friend from Sudan. As we came on a few mud houses by the wayside, or stopped and let someone walk to the foothills where there seemed to be a little village, I would say "How many Christians in this village?" He would reply "None". "Who is going to tell the people about Jesus Christ?" He would say "Well, no one as far as I know. It is too dangerous." To go and start speaking of Jesus would probably mean a severe beating or worse at the hands of the local religious leaders because of their fanatical opposition to Christianity. Thank God for Christians who witness personally and with literature in the bus stations, sowing precious seed which will bring a future harvest because God has promised it.

We have already seen how Ananias reached the Gentile world by welcoming Saul to Christianity, Acts 9:15. One contact at Imperial College, London, led to many families in a Bangladeshi village becoming Christians when the student, a village chief, returned home. We only ever had one letter to go by, but that is what appeared to happen. When a Christian begins to witness to all people in his own home environment, God may expand that ministry all over the world.

We have seen in the last chapter that Cornelius' household was led into the kingdom of heaven by a change in the direction of Peter's ministry. The overriding factor was to actively do God's will for the present time, even if criticism followed. Is it better to be criticised by Christians for helping to save the lost, or to be criticised by God for being disobedient? Peter chose the former, and God honoured him.

In a moment we will look at the church in Antioch to see how those Christians reached beyond their own four walls (if they had four walls!)

Another example would be Acts 16:6-10 where Paul, Silas and Timothy join Luke. Together they respond to the call from Macedonia. Their own ideas to go to the province of Asia and then to Bithynia had to be sacrificed. God closed every door except the one He wanted this missionary team to enter.

Finally in Acts 19:21 Paul decided it was right before God to go to the centre of the Empire, the city of Rome itself. He knew that Rome ruled the world and if a Roman church could be encouraged it could reach to most parts of the world with relative ease. It was a question of seeing what was happening in the church on a much larger scale than just the local work. Every Christian is working in the same work. Each one must faithfully do what God is calling him or her to do. As it is done, a focus should also be kept on how this particular part fits into the overall plan that Almighty God is putting together.

THE CHURCH AT ANTIOCH - Acts 11:19-30

The city of Antioch was the third city of the world at that time, after Rome and Alexandria. It is often known as Antioch in Syria in order to distinguish it from another Antioch in Pisidia or Galatia, that town being mentioned in

Acts 14:19-21. It sent trouble-making Jews to hinder Paul's ministry at Derbe and Lystra and that area. On a New Testament map you will see both clearly marked: the one we are concerned with being 350 or so miles north north-east of Jerusalem, on the River Orontes. Today a town Antakya in Turkey marks the site.

Because of the heavy influence of Judaism on the Christians in Jerusalem, God seems to have chosen Antioch to be the model of the new church, the expression of the body of Jesus Christ. They were formed by people who looked beyond their own group, and they never lost the vision. They were a mixed group of Jews and Gentiles, and the thrilling story shows us they were a model church in many ways for us today.

1. The church at Antioch contained model men. The first mention of the city in the New Testament is in Acts 6:5, where we see one of the deacons appointed to administrate the widows' allowance was **(i) "Nicolas** from Antioch, a convert to Judaism". All we know about him is verse 3 "(he was) known to be full of the Spirit, and wisdom". That was a qualification for his position. In Acts 11:19 it is reasonable to assume he would have returned home to Antioch when the persecution arose in Jerusalem.

The whole story of the church at Antioch, however, revolves around the people mentioned in verse 20. "Some of them, however, **(ii) men from Cyprus and Cyrene**, went to Antioch and began to speak to the Greeks also, telling them the Good News about the Lord Jesus." Perhaps Lucius of Cyrene, 13:1, was one, but by not revealing names God is saying to us: "See how the Spirit of God is moving, causing the church to grow". Men are incidental in one real sense. It is God who must build and do. He often uses men, but not for the man's glory,

only for His own. Never worry that no-one seems to take notice of your efforts for the master - He notices, and in His economy lots of "nothings", with an almighty "1" in front of them, make a very high number indeed!

(iii) Barnabas was a key figure who is named. **(iv) Saul or Paul** is another. Again God moves in different ways. Never criticise a man who has plenty of publicity for Christ and say it is wrong. God, who controls all, gives some men that responsibility to manage for him. Barnabas means 'Son of encouragement', and by comparing 4:36 and 11:23 you will see he lived up to his name. "Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement)" ... "he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts." The Authorised and Revised Standard Versions translate the word 'encouraged' as 'exhorted'. Barnabas was being like Jesus and the Holy Spirit, the Greek verb being 'parakleo' one called alongside to help another. A testimony to Barnabas is given in verse 24 "He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord." Notice he was full of the Holy Spirit and faith: either on its own is dangerous; in fact as Paul says "the Spirit produces faith". One must doubt a person is filled with the Holy Spirit if there is no evidence of faith in their daily life. Lack of faith is a sin and sin stops the flowing of the Holy Spirit.

Notice how Barnabas cared for one man especially, Paul. In 9:26-30 we see him daring to bring this converted enemy to the apostles in Jerusalem. Here, after Paul has been away learning about his Lord, finding out his faith, strengthening his spiritual walk, Barnabas now gives him a teaching task! 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."

That is excellent follow up. A Christian must care for the individuals in his own family, in the Bible Club class, in the congregation. Recognise and give opportunity to one another's talents and gifts. Barnabas acted evidently upon his own initiative, (there is no mention the Holy Spirit said ...etc.) yet I am sure it was the indwelling and guiding of the Spirit of God that prompted this.

(v) Agabus, the disciples, 11:28, 29, and many others, 15:35, all played their role amongst the model men of Antioch. The prophet of future famine, the stewarding of possessions to those they had never met who had a need, and the teaching and preaching of the Word of God, were carried on by these men. All working for the Lord who was building His own church.

2. The church at Antioch had a model Master, 11:26. "The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch". What's in a name? A simple, but very profound point this. The preaching and teaching of Barnabas and others had an effect upon the lives of the people. They changed their life style. They lived out their faith. If they heard at "Barny's Bible Club" that as followers of Jesus Christ they should be doing a certain thing, and they weren't doing it now, they changed their life pattern to do it! This brought them the name "Christians". Their Gentile neighbours called them "Christianoi", Christ's men (they called themselves "the Way"). Those outside the faith could see these men were like their leader Jesus Christ. They did not have to live up to a name they had taken - they were called Christians because of what they did (and did not do) in their lives. This is a test for every Christian today. What do the people around you think of you?

3. The church at Antioch followed a model method. Who controlled the church's methods? 1:8 "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." 8:1 "On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria." God was in control, helping men to move on his commands. 11:19 "Those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch". God, the Spirit, directing through circumstance, and Christ's men responding in faith. It was a new thing to go, but they went.

11:20 "Some men from Cyprus and Cyrene went to Antioch, and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus." Stephen had spoken to Greek Jews before, but these men spoke to plain Greeks. In faith, they were going on a new venture for God as he prompted them. The result will always be the same when His people follow Him like that: verse 21 "the Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord."

Later on we see the same method being followed 13:2-3 "While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them'. So after they had fasted and prayed (testing the spirits to see if they were from God) they placed their hands on them and sent them off." Perhaps this is a glimpse of an elders or leaders meeting. The Holy Spirit said something, a new thing, they checked and then obeyed. That is the model method.

The four true notes of church development seen here.

(i) Continuity - every movement is the outcome of an earlier one.

(ii) Absolute freedom - every movement is a new departure.

(iii) Unbroken unity - every movement is part of one whole.

(iv) Perpetual variety - a great variety of gifts in people were used, the apostolic gift, the evangelistic gift, the prophetic gift and the pastoral gift.

No one man ministry. No stereo-typed pattern. No boundaries, except for unity. Make that your model method and you won't go far wrong. Be where the Holy Spirit can prompt you.

4. The church at Antioch embarked on a model mission. Back to the leaders' meeting in Acts 13:1-3. How important it is to see beyond our small, immediate congregation, to the world-wide work of Jesus Christ. The church at Antioch was worshipping and fasting. Then "the Holy Spirit said, set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." verse 2. What? Send our best men away? Who is going to look after us? Just imagine the complaints you would get in some churches today. But the Antioch church believed more than one man could minister. "In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers" 13:1 lists five, and 15:35 "Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord." The ministry of the church is not limited to one type of person who was ordained to wear his collar back to front! All the saints are involved. Antioch Christians knew this so they were not afraid to spare Barnabas and Paul. They also believed the church was world-wide and not just local. They could see beyond their own four walls to Cyprus, Perga, Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. They knew the lost needed Christ. And they were prepared to share not only their money (as they gave to the Jerusalem church in famine), but also their teachers and evangelists and ministers.

They were not rash or foolish. They tested what the Holy Spirit said. As we are to try the spirits to see if they are of God, so they did. 13:3 "So after they had fasted and prayed" (that's the testing), "they placed their hands on them and sent them off." They were prepared to temporarily lose good men doing a good job, for "the work I (God) have called them to do". That is always the best job. Learn to distinguish between the good and the best. Recognise the gifts in each other to minister to one another. Encourage the development of these gifts. As Paul wrote to Timothy "stir up the gift within you" (Authorised Version) 2 Timothy 1:6, and he gave him an outlet for the use of the gift. By faith Timothy exercised it when Paul gave him the opportunity.

Just think what may have happened to Christianity if the church at Antioch had been disobedient at this point. No Paul on the mission field. If they had done nothing else but send Paul out their heavenly reward would be great enough. Praise God they obeyed.

Not only that - they took an active ongoing interest in events. See what happened on their return. 14:26, 27 "they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles." The church had been praying, and now they listened to testimony of what had happened in answer to their prayers. Paul and Barnabas were their representatives on the field, and the church was very interested in them as people. Verse 28 "they stayed there a long time with the disciples." It is what that verse omits that is important. 18:23 after his second trip "after spending some time in Antioch, Paul set out..." again do you notice the omission? Nothing

about preaching and teaching. Paul and Barnabas were at home in Antioch to rest. To recharge themselves spiritually. To drink in what was ministered to them by others. What a great need there is for this amongst our missionaries today.

A local church should support, pray intelligently (kept well-informed), then care for and build up those out in "the work I (God) have called them to do".

5. The church at Antioch was a model mixture. A mixture is a "compound bringing different substances into a whole". We have already seen how Greeks and Jews are involved together here.

Right back at the founding of the church when Barnabas was sent from Jerusalem to find out what irregularities were happening, we find his judgement based on one thing. 11:23 "When he arrived and saw evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts". God had fitted him for that discerning task by birth and friendships. Now comes a doctrinal dispute. 15:1, 2 "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". We will see how this dispute was resolved in the next chapter.

We have been brought around in a circle. Model men, a model Master, a model Method, a model Mission and a model Mixture. A model mixture must be made up of model men, otherwise something will bubble over, or go lumpy, or go sour. Let me challenge you to spend time alone with God to put yourself right and get yourself into the position where God can put you into the mixture, for His glory. Even in the resolution of doctrinal dispute the Antioch Christians were looking beyond their own work. They had hearts that beat in time with the Lord Jesus'

heart. He had said of Himself "the Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost" Luke 19:10. They were continually doing that themselves, and, where they could, they were helping others in the task too.

Discussion questions

** Share with the group a work someone else does in the church and pray together for that person and work.*

Then, share about a work near you but not in your fellowship.

If you don't know about anything - make it your homework!

** If your pastor leaves to go abroad, your youth leader goes to a new job with a Christian group, can God still be in control?*

**Use the chapter above to give some principles guiding younger*

Christians who may be confused

and some theology to help them cope!

Chapter 15 **SORTING OUT TRADITION** **Acts 15:1- 35**

Every human being likes the comfort of tradition. There can be great blessing in good tradition, but bad tradition can stifle God's work. It is quite probable that the opposition to the church that came from the Jews, the incitement and the stirring up to persecution, Acts 13:50, the poisoning of minds, Acts 14:2, the stoning of the gospel preachers, Acts 14:19, was all easier to deal with than the opposition

that came from Christian believers of a Jewish background within the church's own ranks, Acts 15:1, 5.

It is often hard to know the truth. When a major war, like the gulf war, is reported on television there are always exaggerations, omissions and one-sided reports and so the average viewer has to read between the lines to guess at the truth.

Thirty times in Matthew's gospel Jesus Christ said: "I tell you the truth", for example Matthew 5:18, 18:3, 26:34. In John 14:6 He claimed to be the truth. He promised in John 16:13 that the Holy Spirit would lead Christian disciples into all truth. It is quite reasonable to assume therefore, that there must be error. Trinity House only put lighthouses around the coasts of Great Britain where there are hazardous rocks and currents. The truthful positioning of the light is only necessary where there is the danger of damage or destruction on rocks. Our constant prayer should be with the Psalmist, "Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Saviour", Psalm 25:5.

Truth and tradition are sometimes very difficult to sort out from each other, especially when we have held on to a tradition for almost an entire lifetime. Often practical traditions do not contain errors, but because they become outmoded in a constantly changing world, those traditions can become barriers to the truth being grasped. Trying to alter the starting time or the format of a church worship service would be a case in point. But these things are not as serious as beliefs that become accepted truths over many years, such as "the Bible prohibits a Christian from drinking alcohol".

I got myself into a hot debate which lasted a few days with a church in the Red Sea's Port Sudan. A questioner from the floor asked "What does the Bible mean when it says 'Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your

stomach and your frequent illnesses", 1 Timothy 5:23. My reply was that it meant precisely what it said. Over a lovely breakfast of breads, curried meats, eggs and fruit the next morning I was told that the younger people would take my remark as freedom to go and get drunk on the many home-brews available in the camps of displaced people. I was shocked and so I asked why. I was told that the traditional teaching of the church was that a Christian could not drink alcohol and that the wine mentioned here in 1 Timothy would be non alcoholic. Every Scripture the dear brothers turned up to show me and back up their church tradition spoke against drunkenness. I agreed wholeheartedly that drunkenness was wrong, see 1 Corinthians 6:10. But I could not agree that the Bible teaches Christians to totally abstain from alcohol. A tradition had been pressed into a position of truth, and when challenged from the Bible by other thinking Christians, the basis for it being accepted as truth was found to be faulty. I was very quick to point out that there were very good reasons to teach that it would be wrong for a Christian to drink alcohol in Port Sudan. Firstly, it was not allowed by the law of the country and so Romans 13:1, 2 would apply. "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God."

Secondly, concern for other believers would mean very seriously considering what kind of example was being set, 1 Corinthians 8:9. "Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak." (Verse 13 in the same chapter shows where a man with spiritual priorities would come down in his practice). These are good biblical reasons for total abstinence. But to say that the Bible teaches it is wrong to drink a glass of wine with a meal, or to partake of alcohol at all, is going beyond that truth into error. When

challenged by a questioning younger generation the tradition would be exposed and the credibility of the church severely damaged. We must defend the truth and in doing so be ready to expose all our traditions, old and new to that Bible truth.

In Acts 15 an ongoing wrangle between tradition and truth came to a head in Antioch. It had been like a volcano, lying dormant with fairly regular eruptions ever since Jesus Christ fulfilled all the Jewish laws as the Lamb of God suffering for sinful mankind.

Intense racial and religious problems were two items that persistently threatened to wreck the early Christian church. There were tensions between "Grecian Jews" and "the Aramaic-speaking community" over "the daily distribution of food", Acts 6:1. The Samaritans were reached with the Gospel, 8:5; the Ethiopians were reached with the Gospel, 8:27. The Jews opposed Paul's preaching in their synagogues that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God", 9:20, 22. The Grecian Jews plotted to kill Paul, 9:29. When Roman centurion Cornelius believed the Gospel through Peter's preaching we read: "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", 10:45. Peter was sharply criticised for going and enjoying hospitality with uncircumcised men. (Non-Jewish believers), 11:2. Jews, Greeks, Samaritans and Africans at least had responded to the Gospel. Their political, religious and social backgrounds were very different, and kept them apart from each other, but Jesus Christ, His risen life, His forgiveness of their sins, brought them altogether. Keeping that unity in the church was not easy - it never is. There were some good points. The Greek Christians in Antioch gave generously to help bring relief among the Judean Christians in a severe

famine, 11:28, 29. But there were also some bad points. In Pisidian Antioch, "the Jews ... were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying", 13:45. "They incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region", 13:50. At Iconium "the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers." "The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles", 14:2, 4. At Lystra these same people caused riots that ended with Paul stoned and left for dead, 14:19.

Now, some of this opposition came from outside the church, from non-Christian people. But some of it came from inside the church, from Christian brothers and sisters. Everything does not always go well between believers. You will not be a part of any Christian church for very long before you come across differences between people - debates over practices - discussions about principles. Do not let it be a stumbling block to you. It is for some, but it need not be.

The Christian church lives in unity but not in uniformity.

(a) Unity means that a group of people come together to form one unit, a church. It means there is harmonious co-operation with an agreement of aims and interests. In the New Testament the Greek word UNITY appears twice in Ephesians 4, and nowhere else. (NIV has Colossians 3:14 perfect, Romans 15:5-6 likemindedness). Ephesians 4:3 says "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." 4:13 says that God has given different people different roles in the church to build up the body of Christ "until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God."

Unity is something the church has through the Holy Spirit and must seek to maintain. Unity is maintained by a deeper collective knowledge of Jesus Christ.

(b) Uniformity means the state of being exactly alike, unvarying. If we were all uniform we would be similar in every way, like baked bean tins coming off a production line! Many Christians mistakenly seek UNIFORMITY thinking they are seeking UNITY. The Ephesian Christians were told that there would be differences put in the church by God himself. "Some apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers", Ephesians 4:11. Yet all would work together in unity.

Take a rugby team for example. In rugby you have 15 players, basically divided into 2 groups, forwards and backs. The forwards have to be in the scrummages, the mauls, the rucks and the line outs, but the backs must not be involved there. Their role is to line up behind the focus of play and be ready to pass and run the ball as deeply as possible into the opponents' half. The aim of backs and forwards is the same - to score points and win the match. Their roles are different. They have unity, and even a team colour uniform, but not uniformity. Even within the two groups there are other differences. In the forwards the hooker must be small and nimble, to heel the ball back. The props need to be big and beefy to push the opposition back. The wing forwards must be only half in the scrum and be ready to break away to tackle opponents or to pierce their defence. Unity, but not uniformity.

Now, in Acts 15 we have the rumblings of division in the new testament church and we can learn a great deal from the chapter on this subject of **God's way to deal with conflict.**

1. Earnest dispute. "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," Acts 15:1,2.

The key issue here was this, "Do you have to be circumcised to be saved?" Paul preached, Acts 13:38 "Through Jesus the forgiveness of sins." Peter preached, Acts 10:43 "All the prophets testify about (Jesus) that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." Philip proclaimed Jesus Christ, 8:5. But these men from Judea, who were believers (because they willingly submitted the matter to the apostles in Jerusalem for counsel) added a rider to the Christian gospel. In addition to repentance towards sin and faith in God through Jesus Christ, these men said "Unless you are circumcised, according to (Jewish Law), you cannot be saved," 15:1. 'If a man is circumcised he will earn favour with God', they said. They were following God as best they could and this was their deduction from their understanding of Scripture and experience of life.

Paul and Barnabas had a "sharp dispute and debate with them", verse 2. "No small dissension and disputation" (Authorised Version). They had a stand up argument. They reasoned together, both parties totally convinced they were right and therefore the others were wrong. It was a public division too, because false teaching had gone on in public to begin with.

When disputes come ... firstly recognise that God is omniscient and no-one else is, and secondly, remember that Jesus Christ is the truth, but that neither you, nor I, nor the greatest preacher, teacher, author, who ever lived will ever have a full understanding of God's truth expressed in Jesus.

In Jude 3 we are told to "contend for the faith ... entrusted to the saints." It means we are to take an active part in pursuing and protecting the true Christian gospel. The words speak of an intense, agonising, struggle or contest.

Because we are sincere we will believe in what we stand up for. Because we are sinners we may be wrong in what we understand. There will always be earnest dispute in the Christian church. But there is a right way to handle it.

2. Evident discussion. The dispute was not going to be allowed to fester and bring rancour between members of the body of Christ. It was going to be fully brought out, revealed and - maintaining the unity of the body of Christ (though not the uniformity) - it would be dealt with.

To begin with they looked for the counsel of godly men, verse 2. "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 were experienced Christians, filled with God's Holy Spirit, men who had worked with God over many months or years and evidenced God's mind and will.

Next they listened to the conflicting beliefs, verse 5. "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.'" They argued that circumcision was essential for salvation. True Jewish believers still maintained that an element of religion was earning God's favour by keeping the law.

In verses 6-11 Peter speaks about how God showed his acceptance of the Gentiles by pouring out his Holy Spirit upon them, and says, verse 9 "God purified their hearts by faith." True religion for the Christian consists of casting oneself upon the grace of God.

Then Paul and Barnabas began "telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them," 15:12. The emphasis, as in verse 4, was upon what God had done through them.

The discussion included all the people directly involved - the Jewish converts, Paul and Barnabas, Peter (who had witnessed to Cornelius). Do you see the wisdom in doing this? Jerusalem was regarded as the source of authority. Many of the apostles and the most experienced Christians were there. The Judean Jews may not accept Paul's authority, but they would recognise those in Jerusalem. The odds were on a victory for the Jewish believers. But God spoke out through James!

If you are on God's side never be afraid of putting your case before men even overwhelmingly opposed to you. The troublemakers were there. Those who held the truth were there. Those who gave testimony were there.

We deal with conflicts by earnest dispute and evident discussion with all relevant parties.

3. Effective direction. Peter warned about the danger of putting burdens on new Christians, verse 10. "Why do you test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?" The "yoke" was the emblem of slavery! Don't enslave Christians in legal lists of do's and don'ts!!

James urges, verse 19, "It is my judgement that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God." Do not block their way forward. The world will make it difficult enough without any help from the church!

As brothers, verse 23, "the apostles and elders" were brave in conclusion. They did not duck the issue. They distanced themselves from the troublemakers

("troubling your minds" verse 24 is a word used of marauding robbers who steal anything). They

(i) concur, this is what we believe;

(ii) communicate, this is what you wanted to know;

(iii) confirm by personal visits and a letter, and

(iv) their council of reference was the "whole church", verses 22 and 30.

Nothing was secret. Nothing was sly. It was a sensitive issue spiritually dealt with!

Verses 28, 29 contain no references to any circumcision, or any other ritual, as being necessary for salvation i.e. for becoming Christians. But they do say that all Christians will be careful what they do! To eat strangled meat blood might stumble a Jew - so don't do it. And all forms of sexual immorality (even in the name of religion) are bad, so keep clear.

Paul was later to write of becoming all things to all men to win some of them over. He wrote of the stronger Christians not putting barriers in front of the weak. And here we see the embryo of all that. Let's not add lists of do's and don'ts to Christian living. Let a man love God honestly and openly, and then do what his God tells him to do.

What was the result of all this? Verses 31, 32 "The people read (the letter) and were glad for its encouraging message". "Judas and Silas, the prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers."

This Council did so well to effectively communicate their decisions personally (by sending some men), verbally (to confirm by mouth), in writing (the letter), collectively (with the whole church) and encouragingly. They gave it time too,

verse 33 "After spending some time there, they were sent off by the brothers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them."

How easy it is to destroy and how hard it is to build. To encourage means "urge onwards, to give confidence to, to support." The Holy Spirit is given for our encouragement and one who encourages another works with God. The apostles enforce their order with the positive commendation of those that would comply with it, rather than with a negative condemnation of those that would ignore it. "You will do well to avoid these things."

May God help all of us to handle conflicts in a way that honours Him, His word and all of His people. May we never replace any traditions with other traditions thinking that they are truth. And may we never quench the life of the truth, 2 Corinthians 3:6. "He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant - not of the letter but of the spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."

Discussion questions

* *Share some of the "usually do" ways in your fellowship.*

Do other fellowships do things differently?

Why are those things done that way?

Is there good reason to change?

Why?

* *What Christian principles need to be in evidence in both*

"earnest dispute" and "evident discussion"?

Chapter 16 **WORKING AS A TEAM** Acts 13:1- 3, 18:1- 4, 18

Jesus sent His own disciples out "two by two", Luke 10:1. The Great Commission of Matthew 28:19, 20 was given to "the eleven disciples",

verse 16. There are some New Testament records of Christian work being done by individuals on their own, but most evangelism and church planting is done by teams. (Philip in Acts 8:5 and verse 26, and Paul in Acts 17:16, 17 are two examples of individuals at work).

In this chapter we will examine how God provided particular colleagues for the apostle Paul, and we will try to gain an insight into why He selected the people He did. We will then briefly look at some of the other New Testament church teams.

There has only ever been one Paul. He lived and died between the years of Jesus Christ and AD67. In that brief life span he had taken Christianity into Europe and established many Christian churches. He left the priceless legacy of his writings which God has preserved for all time in the Bible - the results of his thinking through the Old Testament Scriptures and applying them to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the world in which he lived. He had kept his faith through persecution, imprisonment, punishment and, eventually, martyrdom by emperor Nero.

But, although there was only one Paul, many have aspired to be like him. Paul preached Jesus Christ. "If any man is in Christ he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come." 2 Corinthians 5:17.

The aim of his ministry was to "proclaim (Jesus Christ), admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ." Colossians 1:28. He did not draw people to himself just to follow himself! If they followed him he would lead them to Jesus Christ.

The principle he gave to Timothy is a good one, 2 Timothy 2:2 "the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others." I believe the principle of creation - that trees and flowers reproduce with seeds of their own kind, will also apply to the new creation: the church and God's kingdom. We should make it our aim to reproduce other people who will follow Jesus Christ as we do.

There are forty of Paul's colleagues who are named in the New Testament and then there are some six groups of people whose names we do not know. It has been a fascinating study to see why God joined Paul to people like Barnabas - the encourager, to whom Paul owed so much, Acts 11:25-26; to John Mark - the enthusiastic youth who quit when the going got tough but who later became a very profitable help to Paul, 2 Timothy 4:11; to Silas - the ever ready secretary, Acts 15:40; and to many others. As we study let us allow God to put the names of men and women on our hearts that we can team up with for a stronger ministry.

1. God provided Paul with colleagues for at least four reasons: firstly partnership in Christian service. God made sure that Paul was not on his own doing the work he was called to do. In Acts 13:2 he called "Barnabas and Paul", verse 4 "the two of them (were) sent on their way by the Holy Spirit." verse 5 "John (Mark) was with them as their helper."

Paul was a preacher and a reasoner, not afraid to break new ground. Barnabas a preacher and teacher, one noted most for his encouraging of others, he would urge people forward, he would counsel, he would advise. John Mark was literally their under rower! He would pull hard on the oars while they shouted directions. He could not see where they were going, but he put all his might into

making sure they got there, trusting implicitly in his commander's instruction!

That is partnership in the Gospel.

At the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, Paul gave testimony of what God was doing. Paul remember was a learned man, with a university education. He was a brilliant scholar, and a Roman citizen who spoke several languages. Peter also gives testimony. Peter a rough, tough Galilean fisherman. Always willing to fight; never one for fine words. Paul and Peter, another partnership in the Gospel.

Paul praised God for the partnership in the Gospel that he had enjoyed with so many people. The Corinthians, Galatians, the Jerusalem church, the believers at Philippi. To them he wrote: "In all my prayers for all of you I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the Gospel from the first day until now." Philippians 1:4, 5. To a congregation with whom he disagreed on so many issues he wrote "You are the body of Christ, and each of you is a part of it." 1 Corinthians 12:27. "There are different kinds of (gifts, service) workings, but the same God works all of them in all men." 12:6. Verse 18 "God has arranged the parts of the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be."

This is partnership in the Gospel. We must realise that God has placed us in a common fellowship with others, so we can contribute to their needs and they can contribute to ours. We will share profits and losses, ups and downs, with our Christian partners! No Christian is valueless to God - He sent Jesus to die on the cross for our collective salvation. And no Christian is valueless to the Church - the Holy Spirit will lead and guide us into a life of purpose and profit in partnership with other Christians.

2. God provided colleagues for Paul as a provision for each others needs. In so many practical ways God used other Christian men and women to

bless Paul - and, I am sure, used him to bless them. Barnabas gave him the introductions to the apostles in Jerusalem, Acts 9:26-30. He also gave Paul an outlet for his teaching gift, to train him in ministry, Acts 11:25, 26. Silas gave Paul secretarial help, writing the follow up material for churches that we know as 1 and 2 Thessalonians. When imprisoned with Paul, they encouraged each other by singing together, Acts 16:25. Silas was able to stay in Berea and continue evangelistic work even though Paul was driven out of the city, 17:14. Luke gave his medical talents to Paul, perhaps using his medicine to stay with Paul when no-one else could have permission, Philemon verse 24, 2 Timothy 4:11. Lydia opened her home in Philippi for Paul to use as his own, Acts 16:15. She also had a church meeting in her home, verse 40. Jason in Thessalonica opened his home for Paul, suffered greatly as a consequence, including a beating and having to post bail, 17:6, 9. Aquila and Priscilla shared their tent-making work with Paul in Corinth, 18:3. They gave him long term hospitality, 18:18. They travelled with Paul. They had a church meeting in their new home in Ephesus, 1 Corinthians 16:19 and also in their home in Rome, Romans 16:3-5. In Ephesus they probably kept a helpful eye on Timothy - Paul's trainee minister. They certainly used time and energy helping Apollos in his teaching ministry, 18:26. Paul says "They risked their lives for me, not only I, but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them." Romans 16:4.

It sometimes costs to meet the needs of others. God doesn't always call us to do easy things. Many help others in a way that does not hurt themselves but a real helper may pay dearly for the joy of being useful.

Tychicus was another encourager and a servant. He ran messages for Paul, acting as Paul's personal representative, 2 Timothy 4:12, Ephesians 6vs21,

22. Tertius was an 'amanuensis' who wrote the letter to Romans at Paul's dictation, Romans 16:22. He was a literary assistant. Rufus' mother in Rome had been like a mother to Paul too, Romans 16:13.

God chooses to meet our needs through one another. He gives us each other's shoulders to cry on. He gives us courage to rebuke each other. He puts us in the right places at the right times with the right equipment to meet the needs of fellow Christians. Even in prison, Paul was enriched to praise God through the visit of Epaphroditus bearing love-gifts from Philippian Christians, 4:18.

We must be available for God to use us. We must steward what God has given us. Then others can praise God for what He is doing through us.

3. God provided colleagues for Paul to help preserve spiritual fruit.

Paul's God-given task was "to carry (the name of Jesus) before the Gentiles, their kings, and the people of Israel" 9:15. Paul was always looking for a harvest. For an effective harvest several things must happen: think of a potato field; the ground must be prepared, the seed planted, the weeds kept down, the ground earthed up, the diseases controlled, the crop must be gathered not too early or too late, and then good storage must keep it in prime condition for the market.

Paul was the first to acknowledge that "I planted the seed (of the Gospel in Corinth), Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who makes things grow." 1 Corinthians 3:6, 7. God did the work. It was God's church. What happened in and amongst people – changing them as they were converted – was "a demonstration of the (Holy) Spirit's power", 1 Corinthians 2:4. But God uses people, and Paul recognised this.

In the church at Antioch, Acts 13, "there were prophets and teachers: Simeon called Niger", possibly the African who had carried Jesus' cross, Matthew 27:32; "Lucius of Cyrene", one of the first missionaries to come to Antioch, scattered from Jerusalem by the persecution, Acts 11:19, 20; "Manaen" whose name means 'Comforter', foster brother to Herod the tetrarch. Paul and Barnabas worked with them, and were sent out from them. Returning from their first missionary journey "they stayed a long time with the disciples" 14:28. No record of them preaching and teaching, because they were worn out! They needed ministering to! After their trip to Jerusalem they returned again to base in Antioch, 15:35 "where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord." Antioch has a shared ministry. They listened and learned as well as taught and trained. Were there those who said "I wish Barnabas led this"? They had to wait! All in good time. I have often heard Christian pastors and lay leaders say, "I can't do everything". No-one is supposed to do everything! Do only what God calls you to do and encourage others into the gaps.

In Acts 14:23 "Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them (the disciples) in every place (Lystra, Iconium and the other Antioch) and with prayer and fasting committed them to the Lord in whom they had put their trust." The Greek text seems to say that both the new elders and Paul and Barnabas were taking steps of faith. The appointments were made actively trusting in God. For Paul and Barnabas this was to preserve the spiritual fruit of their evangelistic enterprises. The new elders were trusting God to use even their inexperience in his service.

In Acts 20:32 Paul is speaking to the Ephesian church elders. He is on his way to Jerusalem and then Rome, never expecting to see them again. They were very close to his heart. Verses 29, 30 "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." Paul wanted to preserve God's work in these dear people if he possibly could, but he knew he would not be there himself. What did he do? Two things - both of which are important. Firstly he recognised leadership in others. Secondly he recognised God's work was ultimately God's responsibility, verse 32 "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." He taught the elders and he trusted God to build them up. Preserving God's work without taking too much responsibility on himself. He wrote to them, he prayed for them, Ephesians 1:16, and he trusted God to build His church.

Paul could not be in Crete himself, so what did he do? Titus 1:5, "the reason I left you in Crete (Titus) was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you." Now Paul wrote to spur him on in that work, but the responsibility belonged to Titus under God.

It is essential in any local church or Christian mission, that the burden does not rest upon any one person's shoulders. In the church different people will do different jobs. I heard someone liken the five giftings in Ephesians 4 to the fingers on a hand.

- (i) The apostles are like a thumb, important in everything the hand does to keep a grip on things.
- (ii) The prophets are like the index finger pointing the way.
- (iii) The evangelists are the leading finger always out ahead of the rest.
- (iv) The pastors are the ring finger of church ceremony.

(v) The teachers: Well, they may be only small, like the little finger, but they are useful for digging in the ear and things like that!!

Having mentioned all of them Paul says, "From Jesus Christ ... the whole body ... grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." Ephesians 4:16. The way Jesus works to build up the body of Christ is for each person to do what he or she is told by God to do!!

In Paul's life and ministry there was real partnership in Christian service; there was the right provision for each other's needs, and there was due regard for the preservation of spiritual fruit.

4. God provided colleagues for Paul to give pastoral care to the church of Jesus Christ. In Philippians 2:19-22, Paul gives a stirring testimony about Timothy, probably his favourite helper. Their work made them very close indeed. "I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. I have no-one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare for everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel." He was a fellow worker with Paul, 1 Thessalonians 3:2, 3, a faithful messenger for Paul, 1 Thessalonians 3:6; he was leader of the church at Ephesus, though a young man, and Paul developed his pastoral heart.

Remember that not everyone Paul worked with was a success. Perhaps some of us are more like these characters than like Timothy?

Demas was a fellow worker with Paul, Philemon verse 24, in prison with him in Rome (voluntarily) Colossians 4:14, but in 2 Timothy 4:10 Paul says: "Demas,

because he loved this world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica." The love of the world stops many from being workers for the Lord Christ.

Some opposed Paul's work, like Alexander an industrialist - a man with a lot of clout because he had money, 2 Timothy 4:14, 15. It is easy to let money rule the mission or church. Always remember that God can provide through poor people as well as through rich people. Two years into a step of faith for our work some supporters of mine were led into a church that did not believe in financially helping other missions. What would happen to us? A major source of supply was gone. We can give testimony to God providing in a variety of other ways. Without us saying anything He moved others to help us. Another example of teamwork!

Still others opted out of Paul's work like Trophemus left sick at Miletus, 2 Timothy 4:20. He was not physically able to carry on.

But through it all Paul pressed on. God was working in him. God was working through him. Why should he stop? God's team helped him continue his ministry. Of course there are other examples of team ministry outside of Paul's service.

Peter and John were the first after the combined Apostolic group activity on the Day of Pentecost. Right through Acts 3 and 4 they are together in prayer, in miraculous healing, in preaching, in trouble with the authorities, in prison and in prayer again (with the whole church) to keep boldly witnessing.

In Acts 6 it was **a group of deacons** who were given the administrative role of the daily distribution of food among the needy. "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", Acts 6:3. Where the handling of money is concerned not only must the right things be done, they must also be seen to be

done. God has provided us in Ambassadors For Christ Britain with two retired local government officials (one the ex-treasurer) and a retired tax man to help look after our AFC accounts. These men are God's provision for us. Along with my wife Brenda, they look after the receipts and expenditure, the covenant and gift aid claims, the Charity Commission reports, the income tax declarations and any questions from churches and the general public. They are accountable, like me, to our Board of Trustees. They see all this voluntary work as part of their Christian service, using their skills and experience to help God's work. I simply receive the support they receive for me every month and I sit with them for occasional policy decisions and reviews. Teamwork. Another example of partnership in the Gospel.

Barnabas and Saul were entrusted to take monies collected in Antioch towards famine relief in Judea. Later Paul was to stress his accountability. "We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men", 2 Corinthians 8:20, 21.

Another team, with a different purpose, were the "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", Acts 11:20. They fled a common persecution but as they went together they spoke to all sorts of people and witnessed to Jesus Christ. There is a value in serving together.

Many is the time in door to door visitation or in open air witness that I would have given up and gone home if it was not for the team of people I was with. We kept each other at the task. Some days I probably would not have even got to the place of mission if the others on the team were not expecting to see me there.

My appointment with the team helped me overcome doubts about the weather, the wisdom, the ways and one hundred and one other darts the enemy would fire into my mind.

In Acts 15:36-41 we have a difference of opinion between team members Paul and Barnabas. It results in a division that God uses to multiply the number of mission teams by 100%. We will see a little more about this in our next chapter.

Aquila and Priscilla were a husband and wife team who did a great deal for the Gentile churches according to Paul in Romans 16:3, 4. It is interesting to notice that in the references made to them four times Priscilla is mentioned first and twice Aquila. They are always mentioned together. There was no competition between them. What they both did they both saw as "our ministry". They were refugees themselves and yet used their situation to serve God. They made time to meet Paul and shared their jobs and their home with him, Acts 18:1-3. They released Paul for preaching and teaching when it was right for him to do it, Acts 18:5. They used their home for a person to person Bible School when Apollos needed more adequate teaching in the things of God, Acts 18:26. They also used their home for church gatherings while in Rome, see Romans 16:5, 1 Corinthians 16:19.

We should notice that God does not want our business to stop us being involved in His work, He rather wants us to use it as a service vehicle for His work. God is wanting to use every Christian individual, and every Christian couple. The kind of person you are, the possessions you have, the people you come across are no accident. We should always follow God's promptings into a life of useful service.

We have not mentioned by name Erastus who in Acts 19:22 was one who helped Timothy in Macedonia preparing the way for Paul's visits.

There is also Gaius, Acts 19:29; Aristarchus who ended up a fellow prisoner with Paul, Colossians 4:10; Tychicus, Trophemus and Sopater and the rest of the party in Acts 20:4-6. The last chapter of Romans and various references in Corinthians, Ephesians, Colossians, Timothy and Titus list more helpers' names. We may never know how much every one of these actually meant to Paul. But let us make sure we are helpful, encouraging, supporters of others in God's work and that we could really be called together, "fellow workers", Romans 16:3, 2 Corinthians 6:1, 1 Corinthians 3:9, Philemon vs1.

Discussion questions

** How is it practically possible to be helpful and encouraging to one another?*

List as many ways as you can think of.

** Are there people within your fellowship who are not in the mainstream of everything that happens?*

How can they best be encouraged?

Chapter 17 **ENCOURAGING OTHERS INTO THE MINISTRY**

Acts 15:36- 40; 16:1- 5

A friend of mine once wrote an article in a missionary magazine about the immense task facing his mission. "How do you eat an elephant?" he asked, and he came up with two answers. The first was simply 'one mouthful at a time'. If

that was too slow an option he said, the second way is 'bring others to eat it with you'.

Our Lord Jesus called Peter and Andrew, James and John, and the other disciples to follow him. "'Come, follow me', Jesus said "and I will make you fishers of men.' At once they left their nets and followed Him",
Matthew 4:19 and 20.

My old Boys Brigade captain encouraged me into the ministry. I learned a great deal at his Bible class at the church in the London Borough of Hounslow where I was converted. While still a teenager he would ask me to give a testimony when he was preaching in nearby churches. Then I was asked to read the Bible passage and later to lead the service through. My first attempt at being master of ceremonies was before that while I was about 10 years old in the Methodist Sunday School. I did everything quite reasonably well, except I announced the last hymn instead of the sermon. When my parents teased me over lunch I'm told I replied "It didn't matter really because we'd heard it all before!"

As the months and a few years passed by I led my first service and preached at a little Baptist church adjacent to Heathrow airport, London on November 27th 1966. I still have the notes I preached from. When I read them now I wonder how the people listened so politely and restrained themselves from ejecting me from their pulpit. Yet ministries have to start somewhere. If we cannot make those dreadful mistakes in a church pulpit where can we begin? I thank God for the men who let me into their pulpits although they were many times more competent than I was. By their faith and confidence in God I have learned through experience what it means to "preach the Word; be prepared in season

and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage with great patience and careful instruction", 2 Timothy 4:2.

We can now look at several examples in the book of Acts where people encouraged others into a ministry.

The first is in Acts 11:25, 26 where "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". Barnabas knew Saul from the time when he brought him to a rather reluctant group of disciples in Acts 9:26, 27. He respected Saul's conversion and was able to forgive him for his past violent attacks on Christians. He watched Saul "speaking boldly in the name of the Lord", while in Jerusalem, Acts 9:28, before a murder plot forced Saul back to his home town of Tarsus. Out of sight was not out of mind as far as Barnabas was concerned for Saul. Having been different to virtually everyone else in discerning what God was doing in Saul's life, Barnabas brings Saul back into the mainstream of events at Antioch. He had been sent there himself to see what God was doing in bringing people from Greek and Jewish backgrounds into faith. Because large numbers of people had been brought to the Lord (The Greek word 'mega' is used three times in

Acts 11:21, 24 and 26) there was a huge need for systematic discipleship. Who could help Barnabas ground these folk in the Scriptures and the events of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ? Barnabas thought of Saul. He recalled how Saul's commission had been to carry the name of Jesus Christ before the Gentiles, Acts 9:15. He remembered with a warm glow how Saul had baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ, Acts 9:22. He knew

Saul had had experience of talking and debating with Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem, Acts 9:29. The brothers had wisely taken him out of that situation when he provoked death threats against himself, but Barnabas thought that here was another chance in a different environment to use all of Saul's knowledge and experience.

It sounds easy, Acts 11:25, "Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul." We probably could have picked up a phone and had Saul tracked down in virtually no time. We could have invited him to join us and received an answer within an hour, if not a few minutes. I first learned how difficult the events of this little verse were when we wanted someone to take a lecture for us at an evangelists' conference in Khartoum North, Sudan. The proposed speaker was a pastor from the other side of Khartoum. No telephone in his house or ours (not that they work very well even if we had had them). My friend and I travelled by bus for one and a half hours and walked a further thirty minutes to his house. He was away for a few days and was expected back Monday or Tuesday. We left him a note of what we wanted, but we would need a reply to our request for we may have to ask someone else if he couldn't come. It was a two hour journey back.

Late Tuesday evening we again crossed the town to this man's home to find he was out and had not left us any message. We were welcome to wait for what was expected to be an hour or so. Three hours later the man did finally come home and said "Yes, I'll be delighted to come and speak at the conference." It had taken us eleven hours spread over five days to get that reply. It would have been five minutes on the phone.

Barnabas travelled some 200 miles from Antioch to Tarsus. He would not have been totally sure that Saul would be there, and during the ten-day journey must

have wondered whether he was wasting his time. The Greek word translated 'to look for', 'anazeteo', means to look intensively, to search carefully, implying difficulty and effort. One commentator paraphrases it "Barnabas hunted him up". He must have really wanted him in his ministry team to have put himself out so much. Is there a lesson for us in that? Like Barnabas we should look for the potential in Christian people, we should keep our eyes open for possibilities of service, and we should be prepared to pay a personal price for bringing people into what God wants for them. Did Barnabas ever use his time more effectively for the long-term growth of the church?

Of course it did not stop there. Barnabas also shared the nurturing of dozens of young and uninstructed believers in Antioch with Saul. While they were doing that the senior man was also instructing the junior along the way. Then in Acts 13:1-3 the two men team up again on a missionary journey. They are called by God and confirmed by the church at Antioch. By Acts 13:13 the team is already starting to become known as "Paul and his companions". There is a hurdle we must overcome if we are to be faithful to God in bringing others into the ministry. We do not have to stay at the head of things. Just as parents have to let their children grow into adulthood and give freedom to them to develop their own lives in their own way, we must be ready to take a back seat as those God pairs with us to bring into the ministry establish their own spheres of service. They may go with a different church or mission group. They may do what we do, but differently - perhaps in a more relevant way. They may become more famous than us! Praise God. We obeyed Him and did what He asked us to the best of our ability. **Our second example is Barnabas and John Mark, Acts 15:36-41.** Mark had gone with Paul and Barnabas from Antioch on their first missionary journey, Acts

13:5. He was only with them in Cyprus and when their boat reached the mainland at Perga John left them to go back to his mother's home in Jerusalem, see Acts 12:12. Paul and Barnabas obviously viewed his dropping out differently to each other. Acts 15:37 and 38 "Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work." Perhaps Paul was concerned about the work: "We cannot have an unreliable person with us", while Barnabas was characteristically concerned for the worker: "We cannot leave him as a failure for all his life". Barnabas' family relationship with Mark would undoubtedly be an influence, Colossians 4:10. I am very thankful that I have had more than one opportunity in Christian work. I try to learn from my mistakes and so I hope to be more useful as the years go by.

The "sharp disagreement", Acts 15:39 was very real and hurtful to both men. It is costly to team up with some people when others disagree. If God is calling us to help restart a failure then we must do it. Barnabas helped this failure not to fail again. He received Mark back, which is one of the ways of translating 'paralambano' "Barnabas took Mark". Paul may have written him off, but Barnabas had not. Paul himself later acknowledged Mark's value in the ministry, 2 Timothy 4:11. Acts 15:40 could mean that Barnabas was really out on a limb as it appears the brethren commended the team of Paul and Silas while not so commending Barnabas and Mark. In any case he wisely went back with Mark to Cyprus, his own home and the place where Mark had started and succeeded in his earlier ministry. It seems that Paul and Barnabas agreed to preserve their earlier work, by one team going to Cyprus and the other to Asia Minor. God

encouraged unity by separation. Perhaps each one would learn in time that the other had had a valid point. God cares both for His work and all of His workers. Mark traditionally wrote his gospel at the dictation of Peter who frequently visited his family home, Acts 12:12. His Christian upbringing and Christian friends did a great deal towards God's plan for his life.

Our third example is of a church speaking well of one of its younger people and encouraging him into the ministry. Timothy was a disciple in Lystra, Acts 16:1. He had mixed race parents and it was his mother's side that taught him the Scriptures. Paul wrote later "I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also." "From infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus", 2 Timothy 1:5, 3:15. The family is always a great way of encouraging another into the ministry. It need not be as a clergyman or preaching missionary. God requires His people in all walks of life and He regards them all as His ministers. We should tell our children of the great saints of history and pray that God will fulfil His plan for their own lives.

When Paul and Silas arrived in Lystra from Derbe the Bible narrative says "The brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him (Timothy)" Acts 16:2.

A selfish church may have been looking out for its own interests and been wanting to keep Timothy to lead the youth group and occasional services. An ignorant or careless church would not have noticed the blossoming Christian talent in their midst. These believers had a wider church on their minds and the future of their young protégé on their hearts. They may have given the suggestion to Paul and Silas that wider experience would help him immensely.

They willingly accepted the need for circumcision so as not to create a possible obstacle in ministry elsewhere. There was no need for it, but it was helpful to the scope of the work. Were the prophecies mentioned by Paul given in Lystra or Iconium? We don't know, but Paul drew Timothy's attention to them when the ministry was going to be difficult. "Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight." 1 Timothy 1:18. "For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands", 2 Timothy 1:6.

The church noticed, encouraged, supported, advised, took an interest in Timothy. Paul invited him, commissioned him, reminded him of his calling, gave him opportunities, 1 Timothy 1:3, and developed a 'father and son' relationship with Timothy all the way through their respective ministries.

I thank God for the privilege of helping some people over the years who are now pastors or their wives, lay elders in churches or homegroup leaders, missionaries in England and elsewhere. At the time it probably seemed as if Brenda and I were simply helping these individuals through a sticky patch in their lives, but now looking back over twenty years we can see a lot more that God had in mind.

Who should you be giving opportunities to? Do not exclude people on the basis of what they believe or do not believe. We saw in an earlier chapter how Aquila and Priscilla invited Apollos into their home for a while so that they could share with him a more adequate explanation of the way of God. Teaching, persuading, encouraging, recommending and releasing are all in this story of Acts 18:26-28.

The end result was an immense help to the believers in Achaia as Apollos

debated wholeheartedly with their Jewish colleagues, and was able to prove from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.

When Jesus Christ told His disciples to "Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest field", Luke 10:2, He also challenged us to pray for co-workers, to partner them, to provide for them and to point them in the general direction in which He is preparing to use them.

Discussion questions

** Can you think of jobs you do in your fellowship that you could involve someone else in? Setting up the room for the meeting could be a start!*

Are you ready for them to do it better than you do?

** When was the last time you encouraged someone into a ministry you could see they had?*

Chapter 18 **PLANTING NEW CHURCHES (CONGREGATIONS)**

Acts 14:21- 28, 16:11- 40

There is one sense in which the title of this chapter is not true. There is only one Church that Jesus Christ is building upon Himself as the chief cornerstone, Ephesians 2:20. What I am drawing attention to here is how Paul and his friends, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, propagated expressions of that Church in different towns and cities almost wherever they went.

I enjoy gardening, and I particularly enjoy propagating new plants from established ones. I have grown coleus, fuchsia, Christmas cactus, begonia, forsythia, hydrangea, blackcurrants, loganberries and other varieties of flowers and fruit in this way. The means of propagation may give us some insights into reproducing churches. Perhaps the most basic method is to let a plant go to seed

and then plant some of the seeds to produce more plants. As an alternative a piece may be broken off an existing plant and either rooted in water or a hormone compound before planting out separately. The right temperature and humidity should be maintained. For different plants you can make what is called a layering, which means that you bend a low stem or branch into the ground and bury the slight cut or crease you have made in it while still keeping it attached to the main plant. A stone is helpful for weighing the branch down. In a year or so you should be able to sever the links with its parent and plant the new shrub in its own location. One further method is also to dig up the entire plant (as in rhubarb) or clump (as in Iris), and divide it by a swift stroke with a sharp spade before replanting the two (or more) newly created individuals.

Most of these four methods can apply to creating new Christian fellowships.

1. Churches have started from sowing the seed of the gospel with some bearing fruit.
2. Others have been the deliberate, or otherwise, breaking off of a few people who move to a different location.
3. Alternatively an existing fellowship will parent another on the edge of itself for a period until both are ready for the severance.
4. Sadly sometimes there are factions and divisions which result in a lot of uprooting that sets the growth of everything back by a year or two before most parties resettle and begin to grow.

There may be an example of the latter in the division of Paul and Barnabas over Mark, Acts 15:39. The usual method employed in Acts is evident in the missionary journeys of Paul and Barnabas, Acts 13:1-14:28, and Paul and Silas,

Acts 15:40-21:26. During this period people were converted to Christ and gathered into congregations in many places, including Paphos Acts 13:12; Pisidian Antioch Acts 13:43, 48, 49; Iconium Acts 14:1; Lystra and Derbe Acts 14:21; Philippi Acts 16:15, 34, 40; Thessalonica Acts 17:4; Berea Acts 17:12; Athens Acts 17:34; Corinth Acts 18:8; Ephesus Acts 19:10,18,20; 20:1; Troas Acts 20:7; and also many of the surrounding towns and villages. The missionary evangelists "proclaimed the forgiveness of sins through Jesus" Acts 13:38, "spoke boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders" Acts 14:3, "preached the good news" Acts 14:7 etc. There was always some positive reaction and these new believers were gathered together geographically.

In more detail let us examine what happened first in Iconium and then in Philippi.

The church in Iconium began when God put His missionary call to the church leaders in Antioch, Acts 13:1-3. As the leadership listened the Lord showed the way ahead. If they had said 'No' at any time the chapter would have closed. Paul and Barnabas sent by the Holy Spirit, saw conversions in many places, encountered some opposition, but persevered in spreading the Word of the Lord. They had their strategy as you can see by looking at a map of their travels, but they also followed the Holy Spirit's promptings. These two things are not mutually exclusive as some Christians seem to think. They are rather mutually endorsing as God's Spirit confirms, or confronts, the strategy that is submitted to Him and then acted upon in faith. In Acts 13:51 the evangelistic enterprise arrives in Iconium,

In the passage, Acts 14:1-7 and 21-25, we can learn six steps frequently involved in establishing an independent Christian witness in a town.

1. There was preaching and teaching that effectively communicated the life-changing message of Jesus Christ, Acts 14:1. Not all preaching and teaching communicates what we want it to communicate. Sometimes our media or methods shout against our message. In the Iconium synagogue Paul would have read the Old Testament Scriptures and reasoned with his hearers that Jesus Christ was indeed the One sent from God to be their Saviour.

2. There were some conversions. The verse continues "they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed." Not everyone responded positively, but everyone responded! Such a clear line was drawn by the preacher that, "the people of the city were divided, some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles", Acts 14:4.

3. There was conflict - inevitably. Those who would not accept that the message was legitimate and preferred to remain entrenched in their own tradition expecting no more, became abusive as they incited the crowds and prejudiced them against Paul and Barnabas. By 14:5 the violence has become physical and the evangelists' lives were in danger. Paul reminds Timothy about this in his letter, 2 Timothy 3:10-11 "You know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings - what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them."

4. Notice that the whole enterprise was not a one night stand. "So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord ..." Acts 14:3(a). Every gardener will tell you that the results of gardening do not become

evident overnight. We know Paul spent a year and a half in Corinth, Acts 18:11; over two years in Ephesus, Acts 19:10, and three months in Macedonia, Acts 20:3. We must be ready to invest considerable time in our evangelistic endeavours to see substantial results.

5. There was a gracious confirmation from God over and above all the opposition. "The Lord confirmed the message of His grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders" Acts 14:3(b). Just as God had testified to Jesus Christ in this way, Hebrews 2vs4, He also put His seal of approval on the Iconium ministry. The miracles pointed to Jesus Christ. They acted as directional signposts. The wonders made people aware that there was so much more than a material side to life. Precisely what they were we do not know, but "God" was the only explanation.

6. Finally, those who instigated the events showed special care for the folk who were converted and took a stand for Jesus Christ. Although they fled from a plot to kill them, Acts 14:5, 6, they returned at the earliest opportunity for specific reasons. Four things were on their hearts when they returned to Iconium as well as Derbe, Lystra and Pisidian Antioch. They wanted to strengthen, encourage and warn the believers, Acts 14:22, and they wanted to set up a system of responsible people to lead each meeting. "Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust", Acts 14:23. They taught the lessons that needed immediate teaching, they formed a local leadership to take on responsibility and then they left them to God - a positive act of reasonable faith. (Revisits did occur later on, see Acts 15:36 and 16:1-5). By encouraging the believers to remain true to the faith Paul showed he was convinced God's

truth could look after them. By raising a leadership through prayer and fasting Paul showed he was prepared to let the church be a true local expression. By committing them all to the Lord he showed that his trust was in God rather than in his own work.

So the church in Iconium came into being through communication, conversions, conflict, considerable time being allowed, confirmations from God and positive aftercare. These are good steps for us to follow.

For just one more example move to Acts 16:6-40. **Philippi** was contacted for Christ after the human plans to go to Asia and Bithynia were laid aside and the team agreed to follow the vision Paul had of a man calling them on to Macedonia. Philippi would probably have been the first Christian church in Europe. Its establishment followed **the vision** of a person, a place and a plea, "During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us'", Acts 16vs9.

The missionaries' method involved prayer. The first place they went to was "the place of prayer" by the riverside. There were not enough Jews for a synagogue in Philippi. As well as prayer Paul, Timothy, Silas and Luke needed to mix with people in order to evangelise. It was one of those people whose heart was opened by God's Spirit as Paul spoke. The preacher was working in partnership with God. Lydia made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ and was baptised as a sign of her new found faith, Acts 16:15.

The almost routine opposition soon followed except this time it was from the city's business community and not the synagogue! Paul and Silas ended up in prison after a near riot caused by the exorcism of a fortune teller and the consequential rage of her owners. Called by God. Commissioned by the church. Clapped in

jail! Not what they would have chosen. Yet God was still in control. He was going to draw the jailer and his family to Himself and so He arranged for the preachers to be in the prison where they could not go off and do anything else! The jailer took his job conscientiously and put the prisoners in the innermost cell, Acts 16:24. He turned his back on their Christian testimony by going to sleep even while Paul and Silas sang songs of joy and praise, verse 25. When the earthquake struck and the doors broke open the jailer became terrified of personal failure. He was about to commit suicide, verse 27. Then God turned him around, verses 28-32. He saw living testimony of the unexpected way Christians lived through that crisis and he heard the word of the Lord explaining the reason. Finally he testified to receiving new life by being baptised as a believer, verses 33,34. Although the Bible does not say it I am sure Paul put the jailer and family in touch with Lydia and her household. Two converted families! It seems there were others too. "After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and encouraged them. Then they left", Acts 16:40.

Paul developed a loving relationship with the Philippians. The letter he wrote to them shows something of their care for him before and during his time in a Roman prison, Philippians 2:25, 4:14-18, and his care for them, Philippians 1:3-8. He was sure that God would look after them although he could not be there himself. "Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ", Philippians 1:6. We are not aware of other personal visits Paul made, but he wrote to them, he prayed for them, Philippians 1:4, and 9; he sent emissaries to them, such as Timothy,

Philippians 2:19-24. He warned them about troublemakers and he encouraged them to "stand firm in the Lord", Philippians 3:2 and 4:1.

The church at Philippi was founded on a businesswoman and a jailer both soundly converted through personal, situational, evangelism. In a fairly hostile environment, Philippians 1:29, 30, the church grew into having "overseers and deacons", Philippians 1:1, a missionary vision, Philippians 4:15, and they were urged to have a characteristic joy in the Lord, Philippians 4:4.

God's method for world evangelism is His church. He still propagates where He can find people willing to listen to His voice and learn His directions. It is impossible to have too many churches in a town. By that I mean that a housegroup in every street is an excellent goal. In the early eighties three times I visited a church in Jakarta, Indonesia, that made a lasting impression on me. It had then about 7000 members. Five or six services were held on a Sunday, each one packing seven or eight hundred people in, but where were the others? Every member was in a housegroup and the church goal was a housegroup in every street of their section of the capital city. If a few new members came from a different street they were encouraged to start a group. The meeting I enjoyed ministering to most with them was last thing on a Sunday night when all the leaders came together and told what God had been doing in their groups of six to sixty persons throughout the city while the main congregation had been in this building.

Wherever we are we can plant the life of Jesus Christ in our village, town or city, or in a neighbouring one, if we will follow His call.

Discussion questions

** If you could choose a method for starting a new church,*

what would you choose?

why?

** If you have new housegroups developing locally based and with new Christians in - how do you relate them to the "mother" church?*

Do they need to be so related?

Chapter 19 **PRESERVING SPIRITUAL FRUIT Acts 20:17- 31**

I am well aware that God is able to look after His own children. The Ethiopian eunuch received no human follow up, as far as we know, although we do know he had an interest in the Scriptures and his own copy to read, Acts 8:28, 39. We have noted earlier in this book how God used Barnabas to care for Saul when he was born again, Acts 9:27, 11:25, 26. We have no real clues about how Cornelius matured in his faith. We do know he was a man of prayer and devotion even before his conversion, Acts 10:2. He also had a great deal to meditate on in Peter's sermon at his house.

Barnabas turned the new believers at Antioch into disciples of Jesus Christ through a year long Bible class, Acts 11:26 and his presence and ministry "...encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts", verse 23. We also know God developed a leadership team there at Antioch and they were spiritually minded, judging by their activities in Acts 13:1-3.

Almost all of the letters of the New Testament come under the category of 'follow up'. Although Paul had never seen the Romans he wrote to them a reasoned theological treatise, setting out the clear gospel message and its impact and

implications for a Christian lifestyle, Romans 1:13-15, 15:23-32. He wrote to the Corinthian Christians concerning problems that arose in the collective testimony: divisive factions, 1 Corinthians 3, gross immorality and resorting to worldly solutions, chapters 5 and 6; and he answered their questions raised to him, 1 Corinthians 7:1 "Now for the matters you wrote about": also 8:1, 11:18. Paul wrote to the Galatian churches, including Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch to deal with the problem he had faced when he was with them. He assumed they still faced it, the Judaisers adding observance of the Jewish law to faith in Jesus Christ's work as being necessary for salvation. Galatians 1:6 "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel." The Philippian letter was basically a 'thank you' letter for the gifts given to his missionary team by the Philippian Christians, and sent to him in prison by the hand of Epaphroditus, Philippians 4:18. In Colosse the church had been founded by the preaching of Epaphras, one of Paul's converts at Ephesus, Colossians 1:7. The letter argues against the "fine sounding arguments" 2:4, that others were putting forward for acceptance. He encapsulates the gospel message in Colossians 1:15-20. If I may quote his four points they are these:

1. All things were made by Jesus Christ, 1:16.
2. All things were made for Jesus Christ, 1:16.
3. All things are held together in Jesus Christ, 1:17.
4. All things are reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, 1:19, 20.

The best defence against error is always to focus on the Person and Work of Jesus Christ, who is the Truth.

The Thessalonian church was left alone without much teaching from Paul as he had had to leave the city after only three weeks, Acts 17:2. Timothy was sent by Paul as his representative to build on the word of God Paul had been able to briefly share, 1 Thessalonians 2:13, 3:2-6. The purpose of the letter was to "instruct you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more." 1

Thessalonians 4:1. Paul's letters to Timothy were pastoral care for the pastor, helping him so, "if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth", 1 Timothy 3:15. There are also various personal encouragements given to Timothy, perhaps to combat his feelings of inadequacy, despair and frustration, 1:3, 1:18, 1:19, 4:12. Titus received a letter of similar purpose, "these, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you", Titus 2:15.

Philemon was a personal letter following up two people, Philemon himself and the now converted runaway slave Onesimus. (Paul's prayer life amazes and rebukes me. He prayed for just about everyone he knew, Philemon verse 4). Paul wants both men to begin their working relationship again and urges this. "So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me", verse 17.

Whoever wrote Hebrews, it is a letter to follow up Jewish converts who may suffer doubts about leaving their old beliefs. James wrote his letter to encourage his scattered congregation who were undergoing hard persecution. He urged them to look beyond this life to the promised reward from God in heaven, James 1:12.

Peter wrote in a similar situation urging holy living,

1 Peter 1:15. And John wrote to expose the errors in some teaching and to underline the truth that a person who has Jesus Christ in their life is living before God, 1 John 5:12.

So letter writing was very important for follow up. One of our ministries in Britain is to share the news of AFC works in India, Indonesia, Sudan and Zambia, the four AFC International works AFC Britain has adopted for prayer, encouragement and support. I have said many times to our Sudanese team that if they do not write their news to us we cannot share it with their prayer partners. I have also said that if the apostle Paul had the same attitude to writing letters as they did, then about one hundred New Testament pages in my Bible would be blank! The written word is important even today. John got it right in his gospel. "These are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name", John 20:31. We must write where we can to encourage believers in their new found faith. A personal letter can often travel where we cannot go. Use the mail for the Master!

The Acts narrative and the letters also show us other ways the apostles used to preserve the spiritual fruit. They made return visits themselves where they possibly could, for example to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, Acts 14:21, 22 and 18:23. They split up their team's human resources on occasions. Paul went on to Athens while Silas and Timothy conserved the spiritual gains in Berea, Acts 17:14 and 15. Timothy and Erastus went ahead of Paul into Macedonia, Acts 19:22, and others formed a similar advanced party in 20:4, 5. Preparation beforehand can really help follow up afterwards. People remember what they are told to look out for when they see it for themselves.

The touching final encounter of Paul with the elders of the church at Ephesus, Acts 20:17-38, is a lesson in follow up principles for us. Firstly **Paul initiated the contact** with them, verse 17. He was in the area, as near as he was going to be to them and so he invited them to meet with him at Miletus. Contact shows that we care for people and everybody wants to be cared for. Secondly Paul **reminds them of the events they have shared** with each other before, the events recorded in Acts 18:19, 21 and 19:1-20:1. His two and a half years stay is summarised personally in Acts 20:18-21. It highlights a third follow up principle, **example. Paul says "I served ... I was severely tested ... I have not hesitated ... I have declared ..."** Paul was not boasting. He knew the value of a role model and so he highlights himself for the ease of their understanding. Fourthly Paul is **realistic about the next few months** and as far as can be seen in the future. He does not build any false hopes or make promises he cannot keep (even if he were intending to keep them now). When he says "Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again", Acts 20:25, he is also saying to the Ephesian elders, 'Humanly speaking you are on your own'. He would pray for them from a distance (and he did, Ephesians 1:16), but he would not be with them. At this point we should notice the fifth follow up principle, **specific prayer for particular maturity**. Ephesians 1:16-18 and 3:14-21 are excellent prayers we could, and should, pray for the babes in Christ who are our responsibility. Pray for the Holy Spirit to make them wise, to draw them into a deep relationship of love for God, to hold the heavenly hope before them, to manifest Jesus Christ in their lives and to work out His ultimate purpose for them. Sixthly, **teach as much of God's truth as can be assimilated**, trusting God to plant it firmly in their lives, Acts 20: 27. Seventhly,

follow up involves a commission. **Give the believers something to do.** "Keep watch over yourselves", Paul said, verse 28. You may be leaders but do not let your concern for the church make you careless for your own walk with God. He was later to warn Timothy that failure at home meant a bar on public ministry, 1 Timothy 3:5. These men were also to "be shepherds of the church of God", Acts 20:28, accountable to the One who paid the purchase price in full, with His own blood shed on Calvary's cross. Shepherds feed, guide, protect and mature sheep as they live among them, all good ideas for us to think about and apply to ourselves. Eighthly, Paul warned them to **be on guard against predators from outside and inside** who would try to lure believers away into potentially fatal positions,

Acts 20:29-31. After prayer together they parted. Acts 21:1 shows the final ingredient in follow up, deep love, that will do God's will no matter how much it hurts all parties involved.

These principles for follow up, contacts, reminders, role models, realism, prayer, truth, commissioning, warning and love are ones that Paul often used. The last meetings he had in a town often contained these same elements. In Pisidian Antioch "Paul and Barnabas talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God", Acts 13:43. At Lystra and Iconium they went "strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. 'We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God' they said" Acts 14:22. In Lydia's house, after their own release from prison and before they left the city at the request of the local officials, "they met with the brothers and encouraged them", Acts 16:40. Acts 18:23 says "After spending some time in Antioch, Paul set out from there and travelled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and

Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples", while Acts 20:2 says "He travelled through that area (Macedonia), speaking many words of encouragement to the people, and finally arrived in Greece." All these examples bring together strengthening, encouragement, truth, warning and the urging of a continual walk with God just now begun at conversion.

Such follow up is necessary because today, as in those days, there are many voices and vices seeking to lure new Christians away. The Galatians were turning to a perverted gospel, 1:6-9. The Philippians were battling many hard persecutions and discouragements, 1:29, 30. The Colossians were confused at least by rules and regulations imposed by others, 2:16-19. Some of the Thessalonians had given up their jobs and were simply waiting for the Lord Jesus to return, 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13. A truth pressed to an extreme and excluding references to other truths often becomes a reason for error. We must be careful. In the last church I pastored we established a system for follow up that suited our situation at the time. We had five or six mature Christians who were prepared to miss their Bible class and use their knowledge and experience to help new believers or enquirers to the faith. Every week, running concurrently to the Bible Class was a discipleship class led by myself, or later, selected people from the congregation who had been through it. It was informal, in our home, with an opportunity for questions to be asked and discussions to be held as we went through basic Christian truths about God Himself, the Gospel and practical Christian living in the modern world. God granted us, as a small church, just over one hundred people who went through the course over four years. Not all stood for Christ, but a large majority did. We would try to have a Christian of longer standing meet with the new person once a week outside of the class to befriend

them and to talk about particular issues relevant to the individual. Others used the course book (Raising the Standard) one to one with their own friends, especially those who were unable to get to the class on a Sunday morning. We put ourselves out to try to preserve the spiritual fruit. The onus was on us to make the effort, not on the new Christians. Now some of those people are leaders in the church and in other churches too where they have moved away. Follow up is costly in terms of the time taken, the energy exerted, the involvement in the lives of other people, and the hard questions that are raised even to your own faith. But follow up is rewarding. To see mature Christian men and women walking with God in their lives, building Christian homes and families where there was once tragedy and heartbreak is uplifting. To hear of these folk being used to serve God in a variety of circumstances both in the workaday world and in Christian activity helps us to keep going when the going is tough. Paul wrote: "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain", 1 Corinthians 15:58, - and he should know!

Discussion questions

** Discuss the elements necessary in looking after a baby and bringing it up to independence.*

Can you parallel these with looking after new Christians?

** Share with the group what helped you most when you first became a Christian.*

Chapter 20 **REMAINING FAITHFUL TO THE END Acts 28:11- 31**

No-one could ever accuse Paul of being a quitter. Right at the very beginning of his Christian life he was shown by God the privilege and the price of his calling. God promised "Go, this man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." Acts 9:15, 16. Paul did not need too much instruction and he knew what he himself had meted out to Christians during his own persecution excursions. He was aware too, that God had warned him of the difficulties. When he gave testimony to King Agrippa in Caesarea he recalled the Lord's words to him at his conversion: "I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me", Acts 26:17 and 18. Paul knew that a person only needed rescuing if he was in deep trouble and he also knew that Satan would never let people go from his awful power without a struggle.

Paul lists some of his own struggles and hardships in 2 Corinthians 11:23-29. In the following chapter he makes an astounding claim. "That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties, for when I am weak, then I am strong", 2 Corinthians 12:10. He knew that only God's power could bring anyone through severe trouble and, therefore, when he was in deep trouble, God's power would surge into and through the situation.

In the Acts narrative Paul had many reasons to resign, many opportunities to opt out and many excuses for taking an easier lifestyle. He was to have a plot on his

life in Damascus a few weeks after his conversion and he ended up being smuggled out of the city one night in a basket over the wall, Acts 9:23-25. The disciples in Jerusalem initially closed their doors to him, Acts 9:26. They took him to be an undercover agent. In Jerusalem he had another attempt to kill him, Acts 9:29, but was whisked away to the safety of his home town. In Antioch in Pisidia the jealous Jews were abusive to Paul and they aroused persecution that led to his expulsion from the region, Acts 13:45, 50. In Iconium the man of God again encountered venomous language and an attempt to cause him grievous bodily harm if it wasn't murder, Acts 14 verses 2 and 5. A different difficulty arose in Lystra when followers tried to deify Paul and Barnabas, Acts 14:12. The enemy knows that if he cannot defeat us by knocking us down he may succeed by inflating our egos. This fickle crowd soon felt betrayed and were easily swayed by the trouble-makers who now followed Paul from place to place. In Lystra he was stoned and left for dead, Acts 14:19, but God had not finished with him yet. In Acts 15:1 and 2 Paul is confronted by accepted teachers undermining the true gospel with error. After he had gone to a town, they would visit it too adding to his teaching. I'm sure Paul must have said "What is the point in me doing what I'm doing?" By Acts 15:39 it was the wrenching apart of his working partnership with Barnabas that would have dragged him down. When you intensely disagree with someone close to you, whom you respect and owe a great deal to, it also brings real doubts into your mind over whether you have strayed from God's will in your own life. In Philippi Paul was arrested and imprisoned simply because he rebuked an evil spirit who was, in fact, speaking the truth! The owners of the slave girl, who

made their living from her fortune-telling, wrongfully accused him of "advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practise", Acts 16:21. The undaunted spirits of Paul and Silas were still praising God at midnight, in the darkest cell with their feet in stocks in the Philippian lock-up. Even when exonerated and released they were asked to leave the city. In Thessalonica a mob of bad characters were attempting to find and lynch Paul, Acts 17:5, and the team were similarly disrupted in ministry at Berea a few days later, Acts 17:13. In Athens there was some positive response to his preaching while others called him a babbler and poured scorn on him and his message, Acts 17:18, 32-34. The abusive opposition from some Jews in Corinth got to Paul while he was still feeling a bit low, Acts 18:6. God graciously gave him a tonic just when he needed it. The ruler of the synagogue, Crispus, and his entire family became believers and, in addition, God gave a vision to Paul telling him six things which kept him going at this point in his life:

1. He had no real need to fear, even if there were apparent reasons.
2. He should keep preaching, teaching, debating, proving Jesus is the Christ.
3. He should not be silent, even if people said he should be.
4. God was with him, and nothing others could do would take God away!
5. No attacks on him would succeed.
6. God was working in Corinth drawing many people into a saving relationship with Himself, Acts 18:9, 10.

Whenever we feel that the going is becoming too hard, the obstacles too big, the opposition too intense, the disappointments too painful, **spend a night alone**

with God. He is always in control. He can and He will reconfirm your calling and give you the encouragement to keep on keeping on.

A theological attack did come on Paul at Corinth. "This man", they charged, "is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law", Acts 18:13, but it was soon dismissed. At Ephesus Paul's troubles began with the, by now, usual rejection at the synagogue, Acts 19:9. The public maligning of the Way (the Christian movement) eventually led to public riots, Acts 19:23, and Paul was once again the centre of attention. "And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that man-made gods are no gods at all", Acts 19:26. In Greece he had to alter a planned boat ride to Syria because of a plot by the Jews, Acts 20:3, but God used that unexpected change of direction for visits to Philippi, Troas and Miletus during which the dead were raised and the apprehensive Ephesian elders encouraged. In Tyre well-meaning believers attempted to stop Paul going on to Jerusalem although he knew it was what he had to do, Acts 21:4. He did not draw the same conclusion they did, nor from Agabus' prophecy in Caesarea, Acts 21:11,12. Because great difficulty, imprisonment and suffering was prophesied, Paul's friends (including Luke, Acts 21:12 "we") tried to divert him from going on to Jerusalem. His reply to the assembly shows that stubborn obstinacy can sometimes be a gift from God! "Then Paul answered 'Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus'", Acts 21:13.

Once in Jerusalem it only took a week for the Jews to make false accusations about defiling the temple area and once again Paul was the subject of an angry

mob's wrath. It was not an isolated pocket of trouble either! "While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar", Acts 21:31. I sometimes smile when I read Paul telling the Thessalonians to make it their ambition to live a quiet life, 1 Thessalonians 4:11. He may have aimed at it himself, but he certainly did not achieve it! I am sure that even many of his enemies gave him their respect however. Paul had beatings to his body, to his mind, to his dreams, to his friends, but he never gave up. On this occasion he ran the gauntlet of a murderous mob but God gave him the protection of the Roman guard! At the end of a permitted testimony to this mob from the steps of the barracks Paul suffered public and malicious threats to his life, Acts 22:22. He spent the night under guard before going to appear before the Jewish ruling court, the Sanhedrin, the following day. There "the dispute became so violent that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them. He ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force and bring him into the barracks, Acts 23:10. Out of the frying pan into the fire. More than forty men vowed together to kill Paul before they would ever eat again, Acts 23:12. They were going to ambush him on his way to the Sanhedrin next day, but Paul's nephew is used by God to bring protection. Four hundred and seventy Roman military men ensured his safe arrival in Caesarea!

More charges were laid against him by the Jews before Governor Felix, Acts chapter 24, Governor Festus, Acts 25, King Agrippa and Queen Bernice, Acts 25 and 26, and Paul is sped on his way to Rome as he had appealed to be tried before Caesar, Acts 25:11. Even the journey to Rome was not without event. Paul was always able to recall the Lord's word to him in the Jerusalem

barracks, Acts 23:11, "The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, 'Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome'". He knew God would see him safely to the capital of the Empire. That helped him when dangerous decisions were made to sail on in bad weather, Acts 27:11, to run the ship aground in a storm, Acts 27:39 and to kill all the prisoners to prevent any escape, Acts 27:42. A snake tangled with Paul when they were building a fire on Malta, Acts 28:3, and although the islanders attributed his ongoing life to him being a god Paul knew that it was simply the Living God carrying out His word in order to keep His promises.

So Paul arrived at his final destination. Two verses from Acts 28 epitomise the old warrior Paul battling on for the Lord even in his last days. Verse 23 describes him explaining, declaring and trying to convince any who would come to his house arrest that Jesus was the Christ, the long awaited Saviour. He used every day with every person God sent to him, and every part of the day too. No-one was turned away, verse 30. Verse 31 reads "Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ". A two year mission in the heart of the known world. Those words "without hindrance" speak to us. Paul had no control over the Roman authorities or the Jewish accusers and the ways they might hinder him. In fact, several of Caesar's household became believers as God used him there, Philippians 4:22. But Paul did control his own feelings. Self-pity, "See what a mess I'm in", would be a hindrance, as would self-satisfaction, "I've done my part". Resentment towards his enemies would have simply put bitterness into his big heart, and he could tell anyway that God was using all these circumstances to work out His Divine plan.

I would love to be able to write like Paul did about his own death and the value of his life's work.

"For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day - and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing",

2 Timothy 4:6-8.

Wherever you are now, whatever God is calling you to, will you remain faithful to Him to the end?

Discussion questions

* *"Problems develop character".*

Would Paul have developed so far as a Christian without trials?

What does this teach us?

* *Paul said the church was destined to attain "to the whole measure of the fulness of Christ".*

How far have you and your fellowship reached?