

### ***Stretch Out Your Hand***

*“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.” After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. -Acts 4:29-31*

I heard a song on Christian radio recently which said, “If he never did a miracle he would still be God.” Not! The Scriptures testify to the supernatural workings of God in abundance. If your God never did a miracle, pleased be advised, he is not God.

How does God show himself to be God apart from the supernatural? How do we know God other than through, first, the miracle of creation and second, his personal intervention into our lives? When God chooses to reveal himself, how does he do it? Through the miraculous: The parting of the Red Sea; the fire on Mount Carmel; the humiliation of King Nebuchadnezzar. Each of these signs was given primarily to confirm the deity of Yahweh.

***If your God never did a miracle, pleased be advised, he is not God***

How did God choose to verify the authenticity of Jesus as the Son of God? The proof of Jesus’ authority as Messiah and Savior was based on his ability to perform miracles. *Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God...by miracles, wonders and signs (Ac 2:22)*. For the church, as well, the most effective means to authenticate the gospel and convince the unbeliever is the miraculous (see Acts 8:6, 14:3 & Romans 15:18).

Yes, a wicked generation seeks a sign (Luke 11:29). No, we should not necessarily rejoice that the demons submit to us (Luke 10:20). Yes, love is more important than miracles (1 Corinthians 13:1-3). Yes, on the day of judgment many will say, “Lord, Lord” (Matthew 7:22). And yes, the devil can produce counterfeit miracles. These realities, however, did not mute the heart cry of the early church: *“Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”* When faced with impending persecution from the governing authorities the early church prayed for the ability to speak the word of God with great boldness and to experience the cogent power of healings, miracles, wonders and signs in order to confirm that word.

God was pleased to answer that prayer then, and no doubt, will be delighted to answer it again now. I have prayed it myself, many times. So, please, pray it with me now: *Now Lord...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.*

### ***When Ananias Heard This, He Fell down and Died***

*Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?...You have not lied to men but to God." When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. -Acts 5:3-5*

The story of Ananias and Sapphira is a dramatic lesson of the high stakes of revival. The consequences of sin, disobedience and neglect rise in proportion to the purity and power in which the church operates.

In the very early days of the church, soon after Pentecost, an amazing power and purity marked its life. Reverence, awe and wonder filled not only those in the church but those outside and daily drew new believers into their number. This was not the kind of atmosphere in which to test and grieve the Holy Spirit of God, as Ananias and his wife Sapphira tragically discovered. They brought a certain amount of money to give to the needs of the church saying that it was the full amount they had received from the sale of some property they owned. Evidently, Ananias and Sapphira wanted to be recognized for their contribution. But they held back some of the money for themselves. The problem wasn't that they kept some of the money but rather that they lied about it. The consequence? Death. And not by the hands of any human but by the hand of God.

Why such a drastic repercussion?—after all, people have done worse things in many of our churches today and have not paid near the price. This incident is indicative of the principle that the greater the move of the Spirit in a time and place, the greater the potential for both gain and loss. There will be a greater judgment of sin in the midst of an outpouring of God's Spirit because God has a vested interest in protecting the purity of his presence and power.

If you look at the history of the Old Testament you will find that soon after Mt. Sinai, when God's presence was so strong, his judgment against sin was stringent. Do you remember the man who was executed for picking up firewood on the Sabbath (Nu 15:35ff)? The presence of God must necessarily bring judgment against sin, and the stronger the presence, the stricter the judgment. Why else were Nadab and Abihu struck dead after offering unauthorized incense in the presence of God (see Leviticus 10)?

You and I need to know that when the power of God is at hand, we will not be able to get away with the things we used to. The stakes are higher during revival. Lives will be in the balance—perhaps even our own.

***People have done worse things in many of our churches today and have not paid near the price***

***Most "Bible-believing" churches in North America are governed in one of two unbiblical ways***

*Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. -Acts 20:28*

Most "Bible-believing" churches in North America are governed in one of two unbiblical ways. In one, we have the democratic model where authority ultimately rests with the voting members of the church and a board that represents them. The pastors are accountable and submitted to the voting membership and the board. In another, we have an autocratic model where the authority rests with one person, the "senior pastor." The senior pastor is accountable and submitted to no earthly person. The potential problems with each of these two systems are more or less obvious and space does not permit me to elaborate. But I must point out that neither system follows the New Testament pattern. You are probably aware that you will not find a church board or a church vote in the pages of the New Testament, but are you aware that never will you find that someone is designated as the pastor of a church? So what is the alternative? What is the New Testament pattern?

Part of the answer can be found in Paul's address to the elders of the church at Ephesus. Knowing in the Spirit that he would not be returning to the province of Asia, *Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church* (Acts 20:17). Now, notice that he sent for the elders, plural. This is key. The New Testament pattern is always rule by a plurality of elders. Notice as well that in the same breath Paul refers to the elders as *overseers* and *shepherds*. If you study it out, you will clearly see that the terms elder, overseer ("bishop" KJV) and shepherd (same as "pastor") are all used to designate the same office in the church (see also 1 Peter 5:1-2). The elders are the overseers are the pastors. They are the ones who are to oversee, shepherd and direct the affairs of the church (see 1 Timothy 5:17).

So, to whom are they accountable and submitted? Each other. When Paul instructs the Ephesian elders to "*keep watch over yourselves*," he is speaking to them collectively, not just as individuals. They are responsible for keeping watch over the flock of God, but also each other. You may say, "Well isn't this self-governing model a self-serving one?" No. If you have true shepherds appointed as elders, their first responsibility will be to protect, care for and feed the sheep, and their highest priority will be to guard the trust of their flock. They will keep watch over themselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made them overseers.

On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. -Acts 20:7

There is something special about eating together. It is a sign of acceptance and is an integral part of fellowship.

In the first snapshot we get of the early church, Luke reveals that *they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer...Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts* (Ac 2:42, 46). Some, especially in liturgical churches, interpret *the breaking of bread* as participation in the Lord's Supper, or what has become known as "Communion" or "the Eucharist." Acts 2:42 could lend itself to that interpretation, but when it says in verse 46 that *they broke bread in their homes and ate together*, the picture is of sharing a meal. In Acts 20 when Paul and his company were in Troas, Luke says, "On the first day of the week we came together to break bread," and after healing Eutychus, Paul went upstairs again and broke bread and ate.

***When people make room for you at their table, they make room for you in their lives.***

It is not surprising that the early church made it a point to come together and "break bread." Eating together is the most natural convention of fellowship that there is—it is the emblem of friendship. To ask someone to join you for a meal or to "go for coffee" is a sign of acceptance and an indication that you want to spend time with that person. One of the saddest pictures I could paint would be a bustling school cafeteria with a lone student who has no one with whom to eat. When people make room for you at their table, they make room for you in their lives. How do you think the Gentile believers at Antioch felt when Peter would no longer eat with them because of the arrival of certain Jews from Jerusalem (see Galatians 2:11ff)?

There is something special, even sacred, about eating together. In Rev 3:20 we find Jesus standing at the door of our lives and knocking. What will happen if we open the door? He will come in and eat with us. Fellowship and eating go together. When the Bible gives warnings about not having fellowship with certain persons, what are we told? We are told to not eat with them (see 1 Corinthians 5:11).

The early church was intentional about coming together to break bread. If we as a church are not eating together, in both our corporate gatherings and in our homes, we are falling short of the New Testament standard.

Acts 20:13-37

May 31

***Keep Watch over Yourselves***

## ***We Must Obey God Rather than Men!***

"We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name," he said. "Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood." Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than men!" -Acts 5:28-29

When those in authority ask you to do things that are contrary to the will of God, you really have no choice but to obey God and bear the consequences of disobeying those authorities. But when you do, you must be free from a rebellious attitude.

*The high priest and all his associates...were filled with jealousy* (Ac 5:17) toward the apostles, so they were put in jail. Amazingly, an angel of the Lord came to release them and instructed them to go back to the temple and "tell the people the full message of this new life" (v20). The apostles were again apprehended and brought before the Jewish ruling council—the Sanhedrin. The rulers were incensed because Peter and the other apostles had disobeyed their strict orders not to teach in or proclaim the name of Jesus. What were they to do? Jesus had given them the commission to preach the gospel to every creature (see Mark 16:15 KJV) and the angel had specifically told them to go back to the temple and continue to speak. They had no choice: "We must obey God rather than men!" was their stance.

***God's rule of law supersedes all others***

God's rule of law supersedes all others. We are to *obey our leaders and submit to their authority* (He 13:17) but we must respectfully choose not to obey if their demands contravene the revealed will of God. If a mother tells her daughter to steal something, we all know she shouldn't do it. A while back, the denominational authorities for our church informed us as pastors that if we didn't desist from certain ministry practices, we would be removed from the denomination. A couple in our church came to us and said that if we didn't comply, we would be in rebellion and out of God's will. I tried to explain to them that the apostles had set a precedent that we should follow. How could we obey man and disobey what was, to the best of our understanding, the will of God? We could not in good conscience conform to their conditions and so we had to accept the consequence of our credentials being revoked.

Jesus was not leading a rebellion (see page 87). When the authorities came to arrest the apostles in the temple courts, they did not resist even though the majority of the people there were opposed to their arrest. Was not this the practice of both Martin Luther and Martin Luther King Jr.? These men did not have a martyr complex. They, like the apostles, had a conscience and the fortitude to say, "We must obey God rather than men!"

Acts 6

May 4

***It Would Not Be Right to Neglect the Ministry of the Word***

*"It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men....We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." -Acts 6:2-4*

My very first day in seminary, in my very first class, the professor presented us with data from a study called "The Snow Report." Researchers had surveyed a number of pastors and asked them how they would like to spend their time. The respondents indicated that they would prefer to spend 80 percent of their time in "ministry" and 20 percent of their time in "administration." When the pastors reported how they actually invested their time the figures were reversed. The average time spent on "ministry" was 20 percent and on "administration," 80 percent. The professor told us to get used to the idea because that's just the way it is. But does it really have to be that way?

The apostles faced this "ministry" vs. "administration" dilemma. The church was growing fast and some of the Grecian Jews complained because it seemed to them that their widows were being slighted in the daily distribution of food. So the apostles called all the disciples together and said *"It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables."* Indeed. For them to neglect preaching the word of the Lord in order to "wait on tables" would be a disregard of their primary calling and a detriment to the spread of the gospel. Was the distribution of the daily provision of food to those in need unimportant? Obviously not. But there would be those for whom this task would not be "administration" but "ministry," and they would be appointed to do it.

When the apostles made the proposal to turn the responsibility over to seven men (notice the number of Greek names (v5)) and give their attention to *prayer and the ministry of the word*, the proposal pleased all the people. And why not? Who wouldn't want their spiritual leaders spending most of their time in prayer and preaching the gospel? It is nothing short of diabolical that those called to prayer and the ministry of the word end up devoting much or most of their time to secondary things. Some of this is due to the unhealthy expectations of the church, including boards and committees, some due to the spiritual leader's own inability or unwillingness to delegate responsibility, and some due to the "tyranny of the urgent." Whatever the case, the spiritual leaders in the church must correct this and give themselves primarily to prayer and the ministry of the word.

Acts 7:1-53

May 5

***Brothers and Fathers, Listen to Me!***

*About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way. -Acts 19:23*

Those who don't like to rock the boat had better stay off the gospel ship. The kingdom of God is bound to upset somebody wherever it comes. If you take note of Paul's apostolic journeys you will invariably find that wherever he went, sooner or later, someone got their knickers in a knot over a gospel that was being preached with authority and power.

The boys in Ephesus were some upset. Messing with their religion was bad enough, but the word that Paul was preaching was messing with their take-home pay (not the first time Paul had done that (see Acts 16:16ff)). You see, Ephesus was home to one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the temple of the goddess Artemis. There were silversmiths and craftsmen that made a *good income* (Ac 19:25) from selling silver replicas of the temple goddess to the worshipers who would come to the temple. But those worshipers were becoming fewer since Paul had arrived preaching that *man-made gods are no gods at all* (Ac 19:26). Artemis was on the way out and Jesus was on the way in and there was trouble in River City. The craftsmen guild gathered a mob that went hysterical for two solid hours screaming, *"Great is Artemis of the Ephesians"* (v34).

Jesus said, *"The world... hates me because I testify that what it does is evil"* (Jn 7:7). And to his disciples he said, *If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first* (Jn 15:18). When the kingdom of God comes to bear on worldly structures that are under the influence of the evil one (see 1 John 5:19) you can be sure that some commotion will ensue. Jesus also said, *"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword"* (Mt 10:34). The gospel was never meant to get a lukewarm reaction. The disciples were known as people who had *turned the world upside down* (Ac 17:6 KJV). The biggest insult to your form of Christianity is if people don't care one way or the other. Your witness to the truth should get a hot or cold response.

The early church was known as *the Way* for good reason. Jesus said that he was the way and his followers asserted that they were preaching the way. Whenever you say that you are the way and not a way, you are going to meet with opposition. And if your message has any kind of authority and power to where people start becoming convinced that you are right, get ready—a disturbance is about to arise.

Acts 20:1-12

May 30

***We Came Together to Break Bread***

***It is nothing short of diabolical that those called to prayer and the ministry of the word end up devoting much or most of their time to secondary things***

***The boys in Ephesus were some upset***

Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas. -Acts 19:18-19

Evangelist/Songwriter, Benje Graves, has written, “You don’t clean up your life to come, you come to clean up your life.” Once you’ve come, the cleanup will begin.

The gospel was literally transforming the first-century province of Asia. In just a short time, the word of the Lord had reached all who lived there. The city of Ephesus was particularly affected. *God did extraordinary miracles through Paul* (Ac 19:11) as he taught the disciples there for more than two years. The fear of the Lord came on the entire city when some Jews came away naked and bleeding when they tried to cast out demons by saying, “*In the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out*” (see Acts 19:13-16). It was at this point that *many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly.*

***“You don’t clean up your life to come, you come to clean up your life.”***

For those who had believed, the fear of the Lord and their regard for Jesus motivated them to make sure that they were carrying no residual affect of their past life. They came completely clean. Those who had at one time practiced magic arts brought their books and publicly burned them—about one-half million dollars worth in today’s money. You know people are serious about coming clean when they are willing to do away with things that have monetary value. If you are looking for signs of revival, this would be a good one.

A man who has become a good friend came to Christ while attending our church. He had previously owned some video stores and had hundreds of X-rated cassettes in storage. They were worth a lot of money—but instead of selling them, he destroyed them. The Bible says that because the Ephesians publicly destroyed their occultic possessions, *the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power* (v20). Indeed. When people get serious about putting the vestiges of evil behind them, the Lord will honor that witness. I know that some legalistic churches have had public burnings of all things “secular,” but you might want to consider the biblical precedent set here by these Ephesian Christians. Of course, the fear of the Lord would help as well.

Acts 19:23-41

May 29

***There Arose a Great Disturbance about the Way***

Then the high priest asked him, “Are these charges true?” To this he replied: “Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory...” -Acts 7:1-2

I have sometimes wondered why Luke went to the trouble to quote Stephen’s address to the Sanhedrin, an address which is extensive by New Testament standards. When reading it, I want to say, “Yada, yada, yada. Do we really need a history lesson here? Let’s get on with the story.” But the fact that this narrative is recorded at length tells us something not only about the history of the Hebrews, but also how to respond to accusations of not being orthodox in our doctrine and practice.

Stephen was a *man full of God’s grace and power, and did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people* (Ac 6:8). As it happened, some false accusations came against him from certain Jews who stirred up the people by saying “*This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us*” (Ac 6:13-14). Standing before the Sanhedrin, he now had to respond to these allegations. So how does he counter this charge that he is not being true to the law and customs of his people? He recounts, with accuracy and insight, the history of his people. Any objective listeners would have been impressed with his recitation of the spiritual history of Israel and would have observed that he was very much orthodox in his remembrance and interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures.

***Stephen’s example shows the importance of making the effort to assert our orthodoxy in the face of accusation.***

Luke didn’t have to record all of Stephen’s address, but it seems that he did—probably for two reasons. One was that Christians were continually being accused by the Jews of not being orthodox. The recording of Stephen’s full narrative would positively impact any Jewish readers. Another reason had to do with a different accusation often leveled at the Christians from Gentile authorities—that they were subversive. Luke, writing to the *most excellent Theophilus* (Lk 1:3, Ac 1:1), likely a Gentile man of authority, shows throughout the book of Acts that despite the boldness of their preaching and the upheaval that often followed, the disciples were respectful and submissive to the ruling authorities.

In recounting Israel’s history, Stephen was not kowtowing to his accusers. He called them *stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears* (Ac 7:51) and then was stoned by them. But Stephen’s example shows the importance, especially for the sake of the undecided, of making the effort to assert our orthodoxy in the face of accusation.

Acts 7:54-8:4

May 6

***Those Who Had Been Scattered Preached the Word***

*On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria...Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. -Acts 8:1, 4*

In “Vanya,” Myrna Grant’s classic book about the persecution of a Christian soldier in the Soviet Red Army, she tells of how numbers of soldiers in Vanya’s company had come to Christ through his miraculous witness. Becoming aware of the growing fellowship within their corps, the atheistic military officials tortured Vanya to his death and reassigned the other new believers to different military stations. But their move only served to spread the gospel through the Soviet military ranks.

That story has a bit of familiar ring if you read about the martyrdom of Stephen and the ensuing persecution of the church at Jerusalem. Forgetting the advice of the wise Gamaliel, the Sanhedrin just couldn’t leave the Christians alone. These Jews were insanely jealous of the power and influence of the church. Their mad jealousy came to a head when they publicly stoned Stephen. When they did, all hell broke loose. *A great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.*

As to why the Lord wanted the apostles to stay together in Jerusalem while the church was scattered, I’m not sure. There would obviously be some comfort for those being scattered that their leaders were still together “holding the fort.” It was also a healthy development that the spread of the gospel was now in the hands of everyone in the church and not just the apostles. Regardless, this persecution backfired against the devil. He, like the Soviet officials, should have been content to let the gospel be contained to a single locale. The persecution served to fulfill the mandate of Jesus to his disciples when he said, *“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”* (Ac 1:8). The Sanhedrin did not know that their persecution of the church would have the opposite effect they intended. It fueled and spread the fire of the gospel.

Did this persecution have to come that the gospel might spread to Judea and Samaria? Perhaps. What Christian in Jerusalem would have wanted to pack up and go out from such a vibrant fellowship? But the persecution was only for a season. After the conversion of Saul, the church in the entire region enjoyed a time of peace (see Acts 9:31). The scattered ones could find some rest—and perhaps even return home if they desired.

Acts 8:5-25

May 7

***He Had Amazed Them for a Long Time with His Magic***

***This persecution backfired against the devil***

*Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” They answered, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” -Acts 19:1-2 [Thanks to Curt Nielsen whose sermon on this subject I still recall 23 years later]*

Here in Acts 18 and 19, we have two stories of persons who had not received the Holy Spirit even though they were disciples of Jesus.

The first was about Apollos. He had *a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John* (18:24-25). So, *when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately* (18:26). What did Apollos lack in his knowledge and experience? The baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Immediately following this account, we find Paul meeting twelve disciples at Ephesus whom he asked, *“Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?”* The NIV footnote gives an alternative translation, “after,” instead of “when.” I believe the best translation would be, “Have you received the Holy Spirit since you believed.” In any case, the clear indication is that you can be a Christian and not have received the Holy Spirit. Those who believe that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is simultaneous with salvation would argue that these disciples, who, like Apollos, knew only the baptism of John, had not yet put their faith in Christ. But Apollos knew the gospel and taught about Jesus accurately, and these twelve were identified as “disciples” who had “believed.” Like many Christians whom I have known, it was their knowledge of the Holy Spirit that was deficient, not their knowledge of Jesus. Paul’s question to the twelve was directly about the Holy Spirit and whether or not they had received him. They hadn’t even heard of him. Yes, they needed to be baptized again because they had not been baptized properly. Once that happened and Paul laid his hands on them, they received the gift of the Holy Spirit.

A.W. Tozer used to say, “No one was ever filled with the Holy Spirit who didn’t know it.” These twelve certainly knew it because *the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied* (19:6). It is possible to be a Christian and be ignorant of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. So, I ask you, “Have you received the Holy Spirit since you believed?”

Acts 19:8-22

May 28

***Many Came and Openly Confessed Their Evil Deeds***

***It was their knowledge of the Holy Spirit that was deficient, not their knowledge of Jesus***

*One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "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." -Acts 18:9-10*

Only the Lord knows how big his church is in any city. I was left speechless (according to my wife, that's not so unusual) this past week when I attended some worship gatherings in our city with Tommy Tenney. It wasn't the worship or the preaching that made me dumbstruck. It was surveying the hundreds of people gathered and realizing that I had no clue who these people were with whom I was worshipping. I have been living here fifteen years and I get around to a lot of the Christian stuff. But there have been events in my city where hundreds and even thousands of believers have assembled and I wonder, "Where did all these Christians come from?" and I say, "God, you have many people in this city."

I don't know if Paul was feeling at all isolated during his stay in Corinth, but we do know he was feeling fearful (see 1 Corinthians 2:3). So the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision one night and said, "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent...because I have many people in this city." The Lord had many people, saved and yet to be saved, in the city of Corinth. This revelation would encourage Paul to keep speaking the word of the Lord. The same would have been true for Elijah who said concerning the Lord's prophets, "I am the only one left" (1 Ki 19:14). "Not so," replied the Lord. "I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal" (Ro 11:4).

Many years later, Paul would write to Timothy, "The Lord knows those who are his." (2 Ti 2:19). Only the Lord knows the extent of his church in any one place. That is the way it has to be, of course, because only the Lord can add to his church and his knowledge of those who are saved may, or may not, correspond with church membership roles. But from another point of view, it is unfortunate, and is perhaps the will of the enemy, that we are kept isolated from each other and don't have the opportunity to gain a composite view of the church in our area. Think of the synergy we would have if we weren't so separated. Think also of the thousands of persons who have had a genuine encounter with Christ but are disillusioned with church life. The Lord knows these ones as well. What a force we together could be if the church could find its apostolic roots and all those who belong to the Lord could find their expression as God's one church where they live and minister.

Acts 18:23-19:7

May 27

***Did You Receive the Holy Spirit when You Believed?***

*All the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, "This man is the divine power known as the Great Power." They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic. But when they believed Phillip... -Acts 8:10-12*

You will find examples of power encounters throughout the Scriptures—cases where supernatural manifestations of good and evil collide. Truly, we will not be fully exercising our authority in the Lord until we have these kinds of encounters and until the power we carry overthrows the might of those who draw on the power of the dark side.

The story of Philip's venture into Samaria is a good illustration of the superior strength of the gospel as compared to the manifested power of the enemy. Simon, a sorcerer, had gained the attention of all the people in the region. From the prominent to the indigent, they followed him because of his ability to perform miracles. "This man is the divine power known as the Great Power," they said, and they followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic. But when Phillip came to town, Simon lost his following—not to mention his lofty title. Why? Because someone greater than Simon had come doing greater things than the sorcerer. That someone was Jesus Christ, dressed up in Phillip. Recognizing Philip's power, Simon made no effort to go toe to toe with the evangelist. Rather, because he knew that Philip carried a greater authority and resulting power, he, along with the followers that he lost, believed and was baptized. Despite the fact that Simon's flesh coveted the ability to mete out the source of this new power, the gospel had won the day.

The first "Transformations" video produced by the Sentinel Group documents mass conversions in an African city that had been under the spiritual control of a powerful witchdoctor. The church began to pray with great fervor. It resulted in the complete stripping of the witchdoctor's power, her flight from the city, the conversion to Christ of thousands and the appreciable transformation of much of that city.

The God of Moses and Aaron proved more powerful than the sorcery of the Egyptians (see Exodus 7:12; 8:18). The God of Elijah proved more powerful than Baal (see 1 Kings 18). And the God of Phillip proved more powerful than *the divine power known as the Great Power*. Do you believe it feasible that the God you serve would want to show himself more powerful than the gods of this age through your witness?

Acts 8:26-40

May 8

***On His Way He Met an Ethiopian***

***"Where did all these Christians come from?"***

***When Phillip came to town, Simon lost his following because someone had come doing greater things***

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road--the desert road--that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian. -Acts 8:26-27

Do you believe in divine appointments? God has a penchant for orchestrating personal encounters in the most amazing way and there is nothing quite like being a part of one of those heavenly arrangements.

The Lord wanted Phillip to meet a certain Ethiopian official--or more accurately--he wanted the Ethiopian to meet Phillip. Why? Because the Ethiopian, who had gone to Jerusalem to worship, was man ripe for the harvest--a genuine seeker of God. And those who genuinely seek God will recognize the truth of the gospel. So, an angel told Philip to go down to a certain road. On the way, he just happened to see the man on God's heart. Whereas the angel of Lord had given Phillip his first instruction, now the Spirit was telling him to go near the chariot of the man from Africa. When Phillip heard him reading a messianic passage from Isaiah the prophet, he knew his open door had come. The Ethiopian then heard the gospel, believed and was baptized along the road.

***Do you believe in divine appointments?***

There is some great stuff we can learn from this story. First, be open to divine appointments and be sensitive and obedient to the leading of the Spirit. It is a special thing that the Lord would entrust you with a holy meeting. Phillip was the man for the job and he responded faithfully.

Second, take things one step at a time. The whole thing was not outlined to Phillip right away. He was just obedient as he went.

Third, look for those who are hungry for God and ready for the gospel. The precedent of Jesus was to minister to those who were "white unto harvest." We would be amazed if we were to realize the legions of people who are ready for the gospel and for whom the Lord has a divine appointment in mind. All we have to do to see them is to open our spiritual eyes.

Fourth, when you know there has been a divine set-up, look for the open doors as you minister--and walk through them when they present themselves. If the Lord opens the door, you can be sure that your appointment will be fruitful.

Fifth, use the other person's experience, questions or perspective as your springboard into the gospel.

Divine appointments get the attention of those to whom God sends us. It is a most effective and biblical way to reach people with the gospel.

Acts 9:1-19a

May 9

***As He Neared Damascus***

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. -Acts 17:16

It is not politically correct to be upset about someone else's form of worship. The expectation in the western world is that we not only respect the rights of others to worship the way they choose but that we accept those forms as valuable and valid. But such a proposition is deceitful if it turns out that those forms of worship are idolatrous.

Paul had probably never seen anything like it. The city of Athens was full of idols. Something inside of him was terribly bothered by what he saw. The NIV says *he was greatly distressed*. A quite literal rendering would be "the spirit of him in him was provoked." It wasn't just that his sensibilities were offended by the proliferation of idol worship. He was stirred in his spirit. Why was Paul so distressed? Because he knew that Athens was being kept from the true God by its false worship.

***Relativism presumes that there is no such thing as false worship***

Relativism presumes that there is no such thing as false worship--that all forms of worship have value and validity. According to the spirit of the age, truth is not objective; it is determined by the individual. To question whether your form of worship is valid is to profane the preeminent God of our society: The individual.

Paul said to the Athenians, "Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you" (Ac 17:23). You can't get any more politically incorrect than that. But what if Paul's distress was born out of a spiritual sensitivity to something harmful? Is he not performing a selfless and caring act by speaking to them of an important truth to which they are oblivious? What if idolatry and false worship energize demonic activity (see 1 Co 10:20) to which they are subject and oblivious? What should our response be when our spirits become provoked by idols, false deities and demonic worship?

As my wife and I were taking a walk one day, we were passing a completely unmarked building which I, but not she, knew to be a gay bar. She became defiled in her spirit and sick to her stomach and revoltingly asked, "What in the world is in that building?" The spirit within her had become distressed. Should I have told her, "Get over it; it is not your place to judge the lifestyle of these people?" Should we not be provoked in our spirits when we see the psychic infomercial, the Hindu shrine, the porno shop, the sweet grass ceremony, the horoscope column and the Islamic minaret? Indeed we should because it is the Spirit himself who is greatly distressed at these things.

Acts 18:1-22

May 26

***I Have Many People in this City***

*Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. -Acts 17:11*

I have met people who take great pride in the claim that they are like the Bereans in that they “examine the Scriptures” in order to discern the truth. But I have found that many of those who claim to be of noble character like the Bereans are really not like the Bereans at all. They are more like the Thessalonians.

As Paul and Silas were traveling along the coast of the Aegean Sea, making their way into Macedonia with the gospel, they entered the city of Thessalonica. They had success, but were soon driven out by jealous and unbelieving Jews. They came to Berea and began to preach in the Jewish synagogue. Here, the gospel was given a more fitting welcome because *the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians*. What made them of more noble character than the Thessalonians? Two things: *They received the message with great eagerness*, and, *they examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true*.

When I have heard people talk about why the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, they will talk about the fact that they tested the word against what Paul was saying. But the factor that is mentioned first in the narrative, and is perhaps the thing that makes the biggest difference, is that *they received the message with great eagerness*. It was their openness to the gospel that led them to examine the Scriptures. The problem I see with people who like to claim a kinship with the Bereans is that they don’t seem to receive anything *with great eagerness*. They are prone to see themselves as the great defenders of the faith that was once delivered to the saints (see Jude 1:3). Well, this is exactly what the Thessalonians thought they were doing. They scrutinized and rejected what Paul was saying without giving it a fair hearing. And I am afraid that is what the self-proclaimed modern day Bereans do as well, thinking they are so noble as they do it.

The picture I get of the first century Bereans is a people of integrity who looked in the Scriptures not as skeptics but as people hungry for the truth. They had neither “itching ears” nor a constrictive crew. They were more than “open;” they were active and eager seekers. And as such, they were better able to examine the Scriptures and see the light of the gospel.

Acts 17:16-34

May 25

***He Was Greatly Distressed to See the City Full of Idols***

*As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" -Acts 9:3-4*

Jesus said that kingdom of God forcefully advances (see Matthew 11:12). Perhaps there is no greater example of this than the conversion of Saul of Tarsus.

Everyone has heard of Paul. And in his day, while he was still called Saul, everyone had heard of him then too. He was part of the great persecution that broke out against the church of Jerusalem and, in short order, he became its most feared agent. Breathing out threats of murder against the Lord’s disciples, he was on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus to take them as prisoners. Little did he know what would accost him on the way. It was the inexorable force of the kingdom of God.

Imagine the upheaval in both the religious world and the spiritual realm when Saul was converted. In Saul’s context, it would have been of greater impact than if Osama bin Laden came to Christ in repentance. Everyone would have been in disbelieving shock at the word of Saul’s conversion. The Jewish authorities, the demons and the church would have been rocked by the news. Imagine the reaction of the high priest and his associates when they get the dispatch that Saul has gone over to the other side. Imagine the tremor that reverberated through the ranks of hell upon discovering that their most destructive emissary had been commandeered and re-commissioned by the enemy. Imagine the disbelieving astonishment of the church to find out that *“The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy”* (Gal 1:23).

Saul really was commandeered. *As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice....* Concerning his re-commissioning, Jesus said, *“This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel”* (v15). The kingdom of God was forcefully advancing and Jesus chose a man who could forcefully take hold of it.

Could Paul have refused the call? Yes and no. The fact that he said, *“Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel”* (1 Cor 9:16) tells us that he had a choice—but not really. The unrelenting kingdom of God had taken this gale of a man by storm and hurled him into the purposes of God.

Acts 9:19b-43

May 10

***The Grecian Jews Tried to Kill Him***

***The Bereans looked in the Scriptures not as skeptics but as people hungry for the truth***

***The Jewish authorities, the demons and the church would have been rocked by the news***

*So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He talked and debated with the Grecian Jews, but they tried to kill him. -Acts 9:28-29*

We all know that some of the strongest opposition to the new thing that God is doing can come from the “old guard” of the established religion. But who can be worse than the inner circle of the old guard are those who may not be part of the inner circle or may be new to the organization who want to show themselves loyal and zealous to the establishment.

Those in the inner circle of the ruling leadership of the Jews, namely the Sanhedrin, had tried to stop the apostles from preaching, but they were unsuccessful. They couldn't stop the juggernaut that started at Pentecost. One apostolic miracle after another frustrated their resistance. Finally, a man named Gamaliel, a highly respected member of the Sanhedrin, advised the council to, “*Leave these men alone!*” (Ac 5:38). He reasoned that if the disciples were not of God, their efforts would eventually come to nothing. So these high-ranking Jews, most of whom would have been of local origin, began to back off. But in Jerusalem there were a number of “Grecian Jews”—Jews who had come from other parts of the world. What were they doing in Jerusalem? They would come for the same reason that a Muslim would go to Mecca. They were zealous for their religion and wanted to be near the central place of religious experience and influence. If the Sanhedrin was willing to lay down their arms in their fight against The Way, the Grecian Jews were more than ready to take up theirs. And the weapons of their warfare were definitely carnal. It was their lies that instigated the stoning of Stephen and the ensuing persecution of the church. Saul was one of their number. When he went turncoat they were fiercely opposed to him and tried to kill him—even though the Sanhedrin was not attempting to hinder Paul from moving freely and preaching the gospel in Jerusalem. Eventually, it was the Grecian Jews who stirred up lies and got Paul arrested (see Acts 21).

Certainly, the “old guard” in any system, including a denomination or the local church, can be bound and determined to protect their vested interests. But I have seen persons coming from the outside into denominational and church systems who were extra zealous when it came to defending the status quo. It seems that they have to work just a little harder to establish their place—and a crusade against the current heretic is a great opportunity to prove their devotion and gain acceptance in the system.

Acts 10:1-23a

May 11

*Your Prayers and Gifts to the Poor*

*About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. -Acts 16:25-26*

Is it possible to keep your faith and joy in the midst of grave injustice, public humiliation and harsh persecution? Paul and Silas would know.

Maybe Paul was used to it by this time but how could anyone grow accustomed to hostile crowds, false accusations, unwarranted arrests, public humiliation, severe floggings and prison stocks? Surely he and Silas had reason to despair. Once again they had preached the gospel with power and it had gotten them in trouble. When the owners of a fortune-telling slave girl realized they had lost their source of income because Paul had commanded the clairvoyant spirit to leave her, they seized Paul and Silas, gathered a crowd, and dragged them into the marketplace before the magistrates. Without allowing the apostles a word in their defense (even though they were Roman citizens), the magistrates ordered them publicly stripped and flogged at the word of these greedy spirit-realm pimps. The presence of the hostile crowd would have intensified the flogging. Thrown into prison, Paul and Silas were put in the “inner cell” and their feet placed in stocks.

This was not the most likely place for a hymn-sing, but a hymn-sing there was. I can hear them now, “Celebrate Jesus, Celebrate!...He is risen! He is risen!...C'mon and Celebrate...”—a midnight prayer and praise meeting. And since they were in the inner cell, all the other prisoners could hear them. “This is different,” the others are thinking. “These guys have just been stripped, beaten and put in stocks and here they are praying and singing to God. Besides, it's late. Aren't they tired? Aren't they even a bit irritated? What is with these guys?”

Was Paul oblivious to the pain of what he suffered? No. As he explains to the Corinthians, “*We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We... are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body*” (2 Co 4:8-11). And in that prison cell, in the midst of their prayer and praise, the glory and salvation of God were revealed.

Through an eternal perspective, Paul and Silas were able to display a genuine faith and joy in the midst of severe persecution. May the Lord give us grace to do the same.

Acts 17: 1-15

May 24

*The Bereans Were of More Noble Character*

*If the Sanhedrin was willing to lay down their arms in their fight against The Way, the Grecian Jews were more than ready to take up theirs*

*Paul and Silas were able to display a genuine faith and joy in the midst of severe persecution*

*When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to...During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." -Acts 16:7, 9*

Gary Friesen, in his popular book, "Decision Making in the Will of God," says that "Macedonian calls" no longer occur. I beg to differ.

As Paul started out on what would be called his second missionary journey, he and his companions went through Syria and Asia Minor, strengthening the established churches along the way. From there they were going to forge new ground for the gospel. They had in mind to preach the gospel in the province of Asia (modern Turkey). For some reason the Holy Spirit kept them from doing it, so they kept on, traveling some good two-hundred miles west. They tried to enter a place called Bithynia but they could not do it. Why? Because *the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to*. So, they moved on.

It's not that they weren't getting any direction; the Spirit was clearly telling them where not to go. They had their own understanding of where would be a good place to preach the gospel, but the Spirit of God knew best. They would attempt to enter a place and the Spirit would prevent them. By the time they had reached the Aegean Sea, they were primed to hear from God about where they were to go. Their orders came in a vision Paul received in the night. A man from Macedonia was begging, "*Come over to Macedonia and help us.*" This was it. They left there to go and preach the gospel in what we now know as Eastern Europe

God had his reasons for keeping Paul out of Asia Minor and bringing the gospel into Europe at that particular time. Perhaps the region was strategic or perhaps the hunger for the word of God was greater there—we don't know. What we do know is that European culture and world history was changed because of this simple vision that Paul had in the night.

If Paul couldn't lean on his own understanding but needed a vision from the Lord, why should we presume that our ability to reason out the will of God would be any better? Are we more astute than Paul? What would be so hard or unusual about God giving someone a dream or vision concerning direction for their life or ministry? Paul and his companions went into Macedonia with much more confidence that they were in the will of God than if they had just drifted into Asia as they had originally intended.

Are "Macedonian calls" possible today? Not only are they possible, they are needed.

Acts 16:16-40

May 23

*Paul and Silas Were Praying and Singing Hymns*

*An angel of God came to him and said, "Cornelius!" Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked. The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God..." - Acts 10:3-4*

Giving to the poor has always been a way to reach the heart of God. Yahweh's compassion for the poor can be seen in the provision that he made in the law. The regulations concerning gleaning, servitude, interest-free loans, the cancellation of debts, and the triennial produce tithe for the Levites, aliens, orphans and widows were all meant to curtail poverty and its effects.

When God chose the very first Gentile to receive the gospel and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, he chose a man who was known for two simple things: He prayed and gave to the poor. His name was Cornelius, a commander in the Roman army. *He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.* As a precursor to the arrival of the gospel, an angel came to him one day and said, "*Cornelius...your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God.*" The sacrifices of his devotion in prayer and his giving to the poor had become a sweet-smelling offering to God. As a result, God sent Peter and the gospel door was opened to the Gentiles—a door that has since received millions into the kingdom of God.

The Greek word for "gifts to the poor" is traditionally translated, "alms." Almsgiving was a definite and regular New Testament practice. It is an offering for the poor which would be different and separate from regular giving to the church. Some churches call it "benevolence." It is money set aside for the sole purpose of meeting the genuine needs of those who are permanently or temporarily unable to provide for themselves. Those who give alms will be blessed because, "*He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward him for what he has done*" (Pr 19:17).

Cornelius found out that giving to the poor leads to richness in the Spirit. The greatest spiritual blessings will come to those who continue to remember the poor. According to Paul, the only thing that the Jerusalem apostles specifically asked that he do to continue to authenticate his ministry was *remember the poor* (Ga 2:10). The reason Cornelius was chosen was because his prayers and his gifts to the poor had come up as a remembrance offering. God remembered him, because he remembered the poor.

Acts 10:23b-48

May 12

*His Relatives and Close Friends*

*European culture and world history was changed because of this simple vision*

*God remembered him, because he remembered the poor*

*The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa went along. The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. -Acts 10:23-24*

You may have heard the stats. Less than 5 percent of those who come to Christ and become a part of a church fellowship do so because they were first attracted to a preacher or a church ministry program. Over 80 percent are won to Christ and come into the church through the influence of family and friends. For most of us, the greatest influence we will have for Christ will be with our relatives and close friends.

Cornelius was about to hear a message from God, and he knew it. An angel had told him to send for a man named Simon Peter, who was staying down the coast from Caesarea at Joppa. He sent three men on the eighty mile round trip to find Peter and bring him back. Cornelius had about three days to await the much anticipated arrival of the delegation. Now, what would you do if you knew that in three days a man sent by God through an angelic visitation was about to arrive in your home with the word of the Lord? If you were Cornelius, you would call you relatives and friends so they too could hear what God had to say.

*It's your relationships  
which give your witness  
credibility*

Cornelius was a respected man (see Acts 10:22), so when he called together his friends and family, they came. How many of those whom Cornelius invited would have come, do you think? If you consider the stature and character of this Roman centurion, there would have been very few, if any, who would have declined his invitation. Yes, his stature could get people to come but it would have been his character that would bring credibility to the exercise. Cornelius desired that those to whom he was close would get the chance to hear this very important message—and he had a full house when Peter and the other disciples who accompanied him from Joppa arrived. And because of Cornelius's credibility in God's eyes, those who were there received the unprecedented experience of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on their lives.

It's your relationships which give your witness credibility. Your primary sphere of influence is your family and friends. These are the persons who you are most likely to lead to a lasting affinity with Christ. These are the persons whose relationship with you may be the best and easiest door for them to hear the gospel. And because they are your friends and family, they will seriously consider the word of the Lord at your invitation.

Acts 11

May 13

*They Had No Further Objections and Praised God*

*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. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. -Acts 15:37-39*

Disagreement in the church is virtually unavoidable. I would say that in most cases, one party is more warranted in their position than the other, but sometimes the disagreement is between parties of equally upright character and conscience.

Barnabas and Paul had been through thick and thin together, risking their lives for the gospel of Christ. Barnabas was Paul's greatest advocate, bringing him before the Jerusalem elders when they doubted the veracity of his conversion. Barnabas also traveled to all the way to Tarsus to look for Saul and bring him to Antioch to help establish the important work that God was doing there. From there they went on the first great missionary journey, coming through the perils of persecution and attempted murder everywhere they went.

*Some differences may be  
irreconcilable but it doesn't  
mean that the persons  
themselves should be*

These guys had to be close to each other. But when they planned to revisit the churches that had been established, Barnabas wanted to take John Mark along. John Mark had been with them for a short while on their first trip but left them along the way and headed for home. Most assume it was trepidation that caused John Mark to abandon the mission, but we don't know for sure. In any case, when Barnabas suggested they give John Mark (who was his cousin (see Colossians 4:10) another chance, Paul was not in favor of the idea because of Mark's previous desertion. They weren't able to work it out. *They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company.* Barnabas took Mark and went one way and Paul took Silas and went another.

You could say Barnabas (his name means "Son of Encouragement") was a "people" person and Paul was a "principle" person. You and I, depending on what we value, might tend to side with either Paul or Barnabas as we read about their dispute. But even though Paul and Silas were *commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord* (v40) and this is the last you hear of Barnabas in the book of Acts, I don't think you can say one was right and the other wrong.

Some differences may be irreconcilable but it doesn't mean that the persons themselves should be. In the end, it seems that Paul was restored to both Barnabas and John Mark (see 1 Co 9:6; 2 Ti 4:11). They had to part company for a time, but their disagreement did not keep them permanently separated.

Acts 16:6-15

May 22

*A Vision of a Man of Macedonia*

*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." -Acts 15:1*

It is not hard for false teaching to make its way into the church. All it takes is somebody convinced about a proposition with a desire and ability to promulgate it. If there is a predisposition to the false teaching, or lack of resolution against it, you have fertile ground for the teaching to take root. The tares of false doctrine can sprout even in a healthy field.

*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."* The church at Antioch had fast become an important center of activity and influence in the early church. In the church in Judea there were those who had come to faith in Christ (some of whom were from the party of the Pharisees (v5)) who held that salvation still depended on adherence to the Law of Moses and the rite of circumcision. Without authorization from the apostles and elders in Jerusalem, some of these men saw fit to go to Antioch to expound the truth as they saw it, disturbing the Gentile believers and troubling their minds (v24). *This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them (v2) which led to an official censure of these men and their teaching by the leaders of the church at Jerusalem.*

Does it amaze you, as it does me, how some persons with certain convictions will take it upon themselves to seek out an audience for their potentially dangerous teaching? Don't get me wrong—those who think they have something to offer by way of teaching, including myself, require an audience for their ministry to be useful. But it seems that the church has always been plagued by those who will travel land and sea to win people to their point of view (see Matthew 23:15) and, in the process, test God and yoke believers with doctrines they were never meant to bear (see v10).

History shows that there have been those who have gone out without the authorization of the church who did indeed have God's approval to bring reformation to a creeping or rampant apostasy. Doctrinal disputes call for a reasoned and open debate free from personal agendas. Such a debate took place in response to the problem at Antioch and the difficulty was solved, at least temporarily. But it seems the church will always have to contend with those who will want to disturb and trouble the minds of the believers with their zealous misrepresentation of the truth.

Acts 15:36-16:5

May 21

***They Had Such a Sharp Disagreement They Parted Company***

***Does it amaze you how some persons will take it upon themselves to seek out an audience for their dangerous teaching?***

*"So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?" When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life." -Acts 11:17-18*

Experience informs theology—or at least it should. Both Peter and the early church faced a real need for a paradigm shift, and they came through because of experience.

I find few passages of Scripture that refresh my spirit as much as this one. The Jewish religious system of Jesus' day had been ravaged by pharisaical legalism that was lurking at the door of the church as well. The gospel had just broken out among the Gentiles and many believers in Jerusalem had a problem with that. They criticized Peter saying, *"You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them"* (Ac 11:3). Peter's response? *He began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened (v4).*

The thing that refreshes me about this story is the response of the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. This was no small problem for a Jew. Peter himself had said to Cornelius, *"It is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean"* (Ac 10:28). How had God shown Peter? Through a vision in a trance (see Acts 11:5). How's that for an experience? So when Peter explained to the church at Jerusalem about his vision and how the Lord poured out the Holy Spirit on Cornelius and his household, *they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."*

In the church of the New Testament, experience not only informed theology, it changed it. That statement would scare the socks off of some Christians, but how else were Peter and the Jewish Christians supposed to change? I am not suggesting that we become like Mormons who set aside critical thinking and look only for a "burning in the bosom." But, everyone's understanding of scripture is limited, at best. We can't allow ourselves to be like the Pharisees who knew that Jesus couldn't have been from God because he healed on the Sabbath. Often, as was the case with Peter at Caesarea and Paul on the Damascus Road, experience will push us past our biases and allow us to see through the dark glass that inhibits our ability to perceive the truth. Otherwise, we will always be stuck with a theology that was formed in an artificial vacuum of someone else's creation.

Acts 12:1-19a

May 14

***The Church Was Earnestly Praying***

***Experience informs theology***

*So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. -Acts 12:5*

For the first two years of my Christian walk, the joy of the Lord was always with me. Then I experienced my first “desert time” where I could not find his joy. “Certainly, I have sinned,” I reasoned, and sought the Lord for the revelation of my transgression—but none came. This unexpected and unexplained absence of joy caused considerable discontentment. I reluctantly shared my discouragement at a men’s breakfast one Saturday and also with a friend over the phone that afternoon. The next morning at church I was nearing depression. To make matters worse, the choir of which I was a part that day sang a song entitled, “There is Joy in the Lord.” “Not for me,” I thought as I sang. Later that day, when it was time to go to the evening service, I decided not to go. Twenty minutes later I reconsidered and went. Arriving late, I slipped into a pew, joined in worship and joy flooded my entire being. Extremely grateful that the joy of the Lord was once again my strength, I wondered at what was going on. Could it have been my resolve to attend church and enter into worship despite my feelings that made the difference? The Lord spoke to me clearly and said, “The reason you have my joy right now is because someone is praying for you.” I thought, “If someone’s prayers can do that for me, I want to be serious about praying for others.” I went home and began to pray for others with a greater earnestness than I had ever known before.

*“The reason you have joy right now is because someone is praying”*

When Herod seized Peter and put him in prison *the church was earnestly praying to God for him*. Part of the reason for their earnestness, perhaps the biggest part, was the fact that Peter’s arrest had come on the heels of the execution of James, one Jesus’ three closest apostles. It looked like Peter was next in line for Herod’s sword. What was the church to do? Pray. As the song says, “Pray, whenever the foe advances. Pray, whatever the circumstances. Pray, no matter how bad the chances. God has got to come through.” It was certainly time for a prayer meeting. A crisis was looming. So they prayed, and they prayed earnestly. And God did come through. An angel came and miraculously ushered Peter out from under the guard of sixteen soldiers and instead of Peter losing his life, Herod was struck down and eaten to death by worms (see Acts 12:23).

God listens to the prayers of his people—and even more so, the earnest ones. We don’t know how prayer works, but we do know that it does. So keep on praying for others—and do it in earnest.

Acts 12:19b-13:3

May 15

*While They Were Worshiping the Lord and Fasting*

*Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. But...he got up and...they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. -Acts 14:19, 20-21*

Everywhere Barnabas and Paul went, they were met with both honor and hostility. But they continued to lay down that honor and face the hostility for the sake of the gospel and the faith of their disciples.

Paul and Barnabas had preached the gospel in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium and Lystra. In Antioch (not the same Antioch from where they had been commissioned) many believed and followed them (see Acts 13:43) but persecution arose and they were expelled from the region (see Acts 13:50). In Iconium, *they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed* (Ac 14:1), but there arose a plot to kill them so they had to bolt from there (see Acts 14:5-6). Next, they went to Lystra where, after a man who was disabled from birth had been healed, crowds of people wanted to offer sacrifices to them thinking they were the incarnation of the gods (see Acts 14:8-13). But guess who shows up to turn the crowds against the messengers of God? Jews from Antioch and Iconium. The crowds turn on the apostles, stone Paul, drag him outside the city and leave him for dead.

*A missionary furlough might sound good about now*

Imagine that you are Paul. You are stoned and left for dead. The disciples gather around you to pray and the Lord raises you up. What now? Everywhere you go, they try to kill you. A missionary furlough might sound good about now. But no, Paul gets up and actually goes back into the city of Lystra. That must have been a bit of a shocker to the ones who had left him for dead. And after preaching the good news in the next town, Paul and Barnabas retraced their steps back through each of the hostile cities, *strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith*, saying, “*We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God*” (Ac 14:22).

Do you think the disciples in those three cities were encouraged by the return visits of Paul and Barnabas? They risked their very lives not only to preach in these cities, but to return. Their message was to remain true to the faith despite hardships and they were living examples from whom these new disciples could draw inspiration. The fact that they were willing to walk back into places where they had been threatened with death was a testimony, not only to their faith and courage, but to their love and care for the disciples who had been born through their ministry.

Acts 15:1-35

May 20

*Some Men Came down and Were Teaching the Brothers*

*There sat a man crippled in his feet, who was lame from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed and called out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumped up and began to walk. -Acts 14:8-10*

There was a man in the Asia Minor city of Lystra who was lame from birth and had never walked. Paul had come to town and was preaching the gospel of Jesus. Just prior to Lystra, Paul and Barnabas were in Iconium speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders. Whether Paul was speaking about healing in the presence of this disabled man, we can't be sure, but we are sure that inherent in the gospel message is the principle that Jesus Christ heals. During the course of Paul's preaching in Lystra, the man who had never walked acquired faith. This faith was of such a substance that as Paul was speaking he could see that the man had faith to be healed. So, Paul, by faith, called out, "Stand up on your feet!" And guess what? The man had the faith to do it—and he was healed.

***Faith is something that you possess***

Faith is the key which opens the door to the vast majority of healings. Throughout the gospels we find Jesus telling people that it was their faith that healed them (i.e., Matthew 9:29; Mark 5:34; Luke 17:19; 18:42). The man from Lystra was healed because he had faith. If he hadn't, Paul wouldn't have seen it and the man wouldn't have been healed at that time. Without faith, it is impossible to please God or to be saved and unlikely that that without it you will be healed. One thing for sure that the devil would want to take from you is faith.

Faith is something that you possess. *It is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen* (Heb 11:1KJV). One person may possess doubts. Another may possess faith. "Have faith in God," Jesus exhorted his disciples (Mk 11:22). Those who possess faith are able to receive the best of what God has to give.

So, how did the man from Lystra get the faith to be healed? As the story goes, the faith came as he listened to Paul preaching the word of God. Sound preaching will always raise the faith level in the listeners. People are more apt to have faith where the word of God is proclaimed. If you are called to pray for someone's healing, it will help their faith, as well as yours, to share pertinent truths from the Bible regarding healing. And as you do, you like Paul can look at someone and actually see the faith that will bring their healing.

Acts 14:11-28

May 19

***They Returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch***

*While they were worshiping 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, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. -Acts 13:2-3*

Most Christians want to hear the word of the Lord, I assume. In order to do that, we read our Bibles and pray—and maybe even fast and pray. But have we thought about the combination of fasting and worship?

The church at Antioch was beginning to figure prominently in the economy of God. It was a "happening" church where great numbers of persons were being saved and discipled. In Acts 13, Luke names five "prophets and teachers" in the church at Antioch and says, "*While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'*" It is not clear whether it was just the prophets and teachers who were worshiping and fasting or if a wider representation of the church was involved (I would suppose the latter) but one thing is clear—a distinct and historic message came while they were worshiping the Lord and fasting. The Holy Spirit was calling out Barnabas and Saul for their world-changing missionary work.

***If we want a New Testament experience, we need a New Testament practice***

We don't usually associate worship and fasting but, obviously, the church at Antioch did. Many times we go into a time of fasting to hear the voice of God more clearly. In addition, we know that the Lord often speaks to us in worship. It follows then, that the combination of fasting and worship can open the lines to hear the speaking voice of God more clearly. Could it be that our spiritual acumen increases exponentially when we combine worship with our times of prayer and fasting? Concerning Anna, the prophetess, the Scripture says that *she never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying* (Lk 2:37). I am not saying that the primary reason we worship is to become spiritually astute, but we are more apt to hear the voice of the Lord as we commune with him through worship, prayer and fasting.

If we want a New Testament experience, we need a New Testament practice. If we will set aside times, not just of prayer and fasting but, of worship and fasting, we will find a greater dimension of communion with the Lord and the hearing of his word. Perhaps we will even receive a life-changing commission from the Holy Spirit.

Acts 13:4-12

May 16

***Saul, Who Was Also Called Paul***

*Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas... -Acts 13:9*

It is in Acts 13:9 that Saul of Tarsus is first referred to as “Paul.” Acts 13:9 is also the last time that he is referred to as “Saul.” If Luke is chronicling accurately, it is on Paul’s first missionary journey, then, that he became known as Paul instead of Saul. This little observation from Acts 13 may be helpful in understanding the process of moving from an apostolic call to a true apostolic ministry and designation.

We all know that Paul received his calling as an apostle on the road to Damascus (see Acts 9). But being called as an apostle does not mean that you are functioning as one. One may be called at a young age to be a pastor, but will have to wait to know the reality of functioning in that ministry office. It is the same for all of the gift ministry offices listed in Ephesians 4. Jesus gave the church *some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers...* (Eph 4:11). I believe that many in the church today are called to these offices but are not functioning in them because they are either not pursuing those callings or are still growing into them.

I don’t think it mere coincidence that to the reader of Acts, “Saul” becomes “Paul” as he embarks on his first great missionary journey. It was only a matter of hours, or at the most, days, before the journey began that he is still known as “Saul” (See Acts 13:2). The name change here is significant and I believe it marks his identity as a full-fledged apostle. I am convinced that you cannot claim the office of an apostle unless you function in the other four ministry offices of Ephesians 4:11. If you look at Paul’s ministry leading up to Acts 13:9 you will see that he first functioned as an evangelist (Ac 9:19-30). When Barnabas brought “Saul” to Antioch, they disciplined the believers there for a year and you can infer is that he had a role in shepherding the church (Acts 11:26). And then, in Acts 13:1, we see that Saul had the specific designations of *prophet* and *teacher*. So, when he and Barnabas were set apart by the Holy Spirit for this new work, Saul was now ready to be Paul.

Atypically, we don’t know how, where or from whom Paul got his name (it means “little”). But we do know it is associated with great apostolic ministry. It took awhile before Paul moved from his calling as an apostle to the designation. Yes, there are those today with that calling—but before they accept the designation they should remember the road Paul had to take before he got there.

Acts 13:13-52

May 17

***All Who Were Appointed for Eternal Life Believed***

*Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles...When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. -Acts 13:46, 48*

I have come to a conclusion regarding the tension between the sovereignty of God and the free will of man: Both are true. These concepts do not have to be mutually exclusive. Not only can God orchestrate events and outcomes according to his sovereign plan and, at the same time, he can, at the same time give us a choice. How astounding is that?

The legitimacy of this idea is illustrated in Luke’s account of Paul and Barnabas’ mission to Antioch of Pisidia. They began in the synagogue and many of the Jews and the devout converts to Judaism received what they had to say about the forgiveness of sin through Jesus. When the apostles were invited to speak again on the following Sabbath, *almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord* (v43). Of course, *when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy*. They spoke out vehemently against what the apostles were saying. These Jews were exercising their will, choosing to not believe the word of God. In response, Paul and Barnabas boldly proclaimed, *“Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life* (those who reject the gospel must not know their worth in the sight of God), *we now turn to the Gentiles.”*

So, while these were choosing to not believe, many Jews and Gentiles, were coming to Christ by divine appointment. Luke writes that *all who were appointed for eternal life believed*. There were those among the crowd who were set apart by God for the gospel and faith in Christ. The inference here is that there were certain ones predestined to believe. I guess the question is whether it was a completely indiscriminate election or if there were any disposing factors that made those *appointed for eternal life* prime candidates for salvation. I think you can rule out opposite viewpoints on the extreme: It has got to be more that God’s foreknowledge that is being described here. And, it has to be more than an arbitrary selection process that includes the fated and excludes the unfortunate. Jesus said, *“Many are called but few are chosen”* (Mt 22:14 KJV). It seems that when Paul and Barnabas preached in Pisidian Antioch, everyone who was called was also chosen.

Is it too much to think that within the exercise of his will that God can give us the ability to exercise ours? Of course not—that’s part of what makes him God.

Acts 14:1-10

May 18

***Paul Saw That He Had Faith to Be Healed***

***Being called as an apostle does not mean that you are functioning as one***

***Is it too much to think that within the exercise of his will that God can give us the ability to exercise ours?***