

Chapter One
“The Acts of the Risen Christ”

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The Book of Acts is the only inspired book of church history in the New Testament. It connects the four Gospels to the thirteen letters of Paul. If it were not for this history book, when you begin to read the letters of Paul, you would ask yourself, “Who is this Apostle named Paul? I read nothing of him in the Gospels.” There would be a huge missing link in the New Testament without the book we are now going to survey.

There is a sense in which the first five books of the New Testament are all history books. While the Gospels are primarily inspired biographies of Jesus, they are also history books. However, the Book of Acts is set apart from the Gospels because it is the history book of the New Testament church.

The Book of Acts begins: “In my former book, Oh Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day when He was taken up into heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.” (Acts 1:1, 2)

From these first verses in Acts we know that the author of this book is the same man who wrote the Gospel of Luke, and that he is addressing the Book of Acts to the same man to whom he addressed the third Gospel. Theophilus, whose name means “lover of God,” was apparently a man whom Luke considered worthy of receiving these two vitally important documents.

In the Book of Acts, Luke is continuing the story he began in the Gospel that bears his name. Luke writes that, in his Gospel, he gave us an historical, accurate account of all the things Jesus began to do until His ascension. However, Luke is informing us that, after His ascension, Jesus continued, “to do and teach” through the apostles. Therefore, many editions of the Bible call this book, “The Acts of the Apostles.”

When we understand the importance of the Day of Pentecost, we believe a better title might be, “The Acts of the Holy Spirit through the Apostles.” Since Peter attributes all the signs and wonders of Pentecost to the risen, living Christ, still a better title would be, “The Acts of the Risen Christ through the Apostles.” (2:32, 33)

Make the observation that the Book of Acts does not end - it simply stops. Some scholars believe this was because Luke was arrested and was not able to finish the book. Others believe the book does not end because it is the history of the church, and you and I are still writing that history.

What to Look for in the Book of Acts

Since the Book of Acts is a history book, you should approach this book as you did the twelve history books of the Old Testament. Paul wrote of Hebrew history: “These things happened to them for examples and were written down as warnings for us, on

whom the fulfillment of the ages has come.” (I Corinthians 10:11)
Look for examples and warnings when you read the Book of Acts.

The Purpose of the Church

As you read this history book, look for the purpose given to the church. When Jesus came to the end of His time with the apostles, He gave them what we call “The Great Commission.” You will find the Great Commission at the end of each of the four Gospels. According to Matthew, these were the last words of Jesus to His disciples:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28: 18-20)

The history book of the New Testament begins the same way the four Gospels end, with this Great Commission. The Great Commission actually has one imperative or commandment - “Make disciples.” Then, there are four participles that modify the imperative – Make disciples: going, preaching, baptizing, and teaching.

In the Book of Acts, this is precisely what happens. The apostles make disciples by going, preaching, baptizing and teaching. The purpose given to the church, from its very beginning, is the

Great Commission. That commission is “the charter (the written purpose) of the church”. Like any other organization, the church must fulfill the terms of its charter or the church should cease and desist.

The Promise Given to the Church

In the first verses of this book, we are told, that before He ascends into heaven, Jesus gives commandments to the apostles. In addition to the Great Commission, Jesus commanded them to wait. “Wait for the promise of the Father to be fulfilled.” (Acts 1:4,5) Jesus had promised them in the upper room that He would send them the Holy Spirit. He is now essentially commanding them to not take the first step in obedience to His Great Commission until that promise is fulfilled.”

The Scriptures have a lot to say about waiting on the Lord. Isaiah preached one of my favorite sermons on waiting: “Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.” (Isaiah 40:31)

When Isaiah told the people of God to wait as an eagle waits, he was sharing a very precious truth about faith. There are times when eagles do not fly. When an eagle sees a storm approaching, it will sit on the edge of its nest for a long, long time, perhaps for hours, and wait until those wind currents build up to a high velocity. Then it leaps 5 meters off its nest into those strong winds, spreads its

magnificent wings, and finds in that powerful wind the aerodynamics it needs to soar over its storm.

As you read the first chapter of Acts, picture the church as an eagle sitting on the side of its nest, waiting for the wind of the Spirit that is going to come on the Day of Pentecost. When you read the second chapter of this book, imagine the eagle leaping from its nest, trusting the wind to give it the aerodynamics to soar over the adversity it encounters.

The Power Given to the Church

Chapter Two describes the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. This is one of the most important events in the history of the people of God, because the church simply cannot fulfill its purpose, unless the power of the Holy Spirit comes upon her. This is also true at the individual level. When we attempt to make a disciple for Jesus Christ, we are attempting the impossible without the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Performance Given by the Church

You may remember that the emphasis of Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount was not on profession, but performance (Matthew 5-7). According to Jesus, the important thing is not what we say, but what we do. He emphasized that value when He taught the apostles. We should not be surprised when we read that the first-century world was amazed by the performance of the church.

There are many things you should observe about the performance of the church. First, observe the preaching of the apostles. There is a lot of great preaching recorded in this history book, and that great preaching begins on the Day of Pentecost. The most important result of Pentecost was that three thousand disciples were made through Peter's preaching, and thousands were converted every time Peter preached sermons following the Day of Pentecost.

The preaching of the apostles in the Book of Acts is anointed preaching. By that I mean that the Holy Spirit of God comes upon them as they preach. This is called "unction" in the Bible, which means the energizing anointing of the Holy Spirit upon the one who is preaching or ministering any of what become known as the gifts of the Spirit.

Carefully consider the recorded sermons of Peter in the Book of Acts. There does not seem to be anything special about them. So why were thousands converted every time Peter preached? There were supernatural results because Peter had the energizing unction of the Holy Spirit upon him when he preached. The disciples of Jesus were accused of filling all Jerusalem with their teachings (5:28). Are we who follow Christ today ever accused of that, and would there be enough evidence to convict us if we were?

So, What Is a Church?

As you read the Book of Acts, make the observation that you are introduced to approximately fifty people in this history book of

the New Testament Church. The word "church" is the Greek word "ecclesia" which means "assembly" or "called out ones". This word means, "An assembly of people who are called out of this world to follow the risen, living Christ, have fellowship with Him, and with each other." In the purest sense of the word, "church" means "people".

As you read the Book of Acts through for the first time, try to become acquainted with at least fifty people in addition to Peter and Paul. The Book of Acts is the history of very ordinary people doing very extraordinary things because they are anointed and filled with the Holy Spirit of God. That same God and that same Power is available to you and me to do His work today (Matthew 28:18-20).

When you serve the Lord today, do you come before you go? Do you wait in His presence for the energizing unction of the Holy Spirit to come upon you, or do you simply go and try to do His work in your own strength? One of the messages of the Book of Acts is, that without the help of God we cannot accomplish the work of God. We must therefore wait for the power of the Holy Spirit before we attempt to do the work of the risen, living Christ.

Chapter Two

“The Visible Fingerprints of the Invisible Church”

The second chapter begins by describing the Day of Pentecost, which was the birthday of the church (Acts 2:1-18). As we read the second chapter of Acts, it is important to realize that the Day of Pentecost was a Jewish holy day. This was their celebration of the harvest, a “Day of Thanksgiving” when the Jewish people thanked God for His provision of their harvest. There is great symbolic, or allegorical significance here, because a great spiritual harvest was about to begin on that holy day. On the Day of Pentecost, the risen Christ began to build the church, which would evangelize the world with and for Him.

This was now possible because the Holy Spirit came down in great power that day. There were signs and wonders that accompanied the coming of the Holy Spirit. There was a sound like a mighty, rushing wind. Divided tongues like fire sat on the heads of those who were “prophesying”. Then those same people “Spoke with other tongues.”

A question and its answer help us to focus the meaning of this miraculous event. The question was: “What does this mean?” Peter answered the question in his sermon: “This is that which was prophesied by the prophet Joel.” Joel had prophesied that, in the latter days, God would pour out His Spirit upon His sons and daughters and they would prophesy (Joel 2:28,29).

At Pentecost, the message that came through the miracle of these tongues is labeled “prophecy”, or a message from God that is directed to the ears of people.

Paul writes about a miracle he describes as “the gift of tongues.” He states very clearly that the gift of tongues he is describing is very different from the tongues that were spoken on the Day of Pentecost. He writes, “For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men, but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; in his spirit he is speaking mysteries.” (I Corinthians 14:2)

When a believer is exercising this gift of tongues his message is not addressed to the ears of men. He is speaking to God. He is not speaking to men, as the speakers did on the Day of Pentecost. He is speaking to God. But the tongues we read about at Pentecost communicated a prophecy, a message from God to man. Those tongues were one of the many signs and wonders that accompanied the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost.

There is more than one Pentecost recorded in the Book of Acts. First there is the Pentecost in Jerusalem. Then when the apostles go into Samaria, and several times when they cross into the non-Jewish world, they experience a Pentecost. Make the observation that each time there is a Pentecost, it is always related to the purpose given to the church in the Great Commission: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and (then) you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

“Fingerprints”

There is one more observation you should make as you read the Book of Acts. Observe the patterns that emerge in the first generation of the church. First of all, observe the pattern of the church itself. You might call this pattern “The Visible Fingerprints of the Invisible Church”. Theologians speak of the church visible and invisible, or the Church universal and the church in its local expression. The fellowship of believers of which you are a part in your community is to be a local, visible expression of the invisible, universal Church the risen Christ is building in this world.

How do we know our local church is a visible expression of the invisible, universal Church? Just as our fingerprints can identify where we have been and what we have touched, the church can be identified by “fingerprints”. Check for these “fingerprints” as you study the first generation church. The church in the Book of Acts had “fingerprints” - visible expressions of the true, universal, invisible Church.

Evangelism was the “thumbprint” of the church that was born on the Day of Pentecost. The apostles understood that they were to reach out as missionaries and evangelists. Three thousand people were converted on the Day of Pentecost alone, and thousands more are converted later when the apostles and others preach the Gospel.

Teaching was the “index fingerprint” of the church. We read that the new converts continued in the teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayer with the apostles (Acts 2:42).

The visible “middle fingerprint” of the invisible church was fellowship. The apostles believed that the people they taught should interact with them. The Greek word for “fellowship” is “koinonia”. The word means to be in a partnership that is founded on a covenant of commitment. The covenant and commitment of first generation believers were to the risen, living Christ first, and only then to each other.

Where did the apostles get the idea that those who were being taught should fellowship with those who were teaching them? You may remember from our survey of the Gospel of John that when some of them met Jesus, they asked Him where He lived (John 1:37-39). Jesus answered by inviting them to come and see where He lived. We read that they came and saw where He lived, they lived with Him, and they lived and died for Him because of what they saw when they made the commitment to come and see where and how He lived. They lived with Him for three years. That is why we should not be surprised when we read that the people who were converted on the Day of Pentecost had a special quality of fellowship with their disciple makers.

The “ring fingerprint” was worship. We read that the converts also devoted themselves to “the breaking of bread” with the apostles (Acts 2:42). That meant the Communion Table. When Jesus instituted what we call “the Lord’s Table”, and instructed them to partake of that table until His return (I Corinthians 11:26), He was giving the apostles His only instruction about how He wanted His

church to worship (Luke 22:14-19). So when the first disciples assembled together, they worshiped by observing the Table of the Lord.

We also read that they continued with the apostles in prayer - the visible “little fingerprint” of the invisible church. Since we cannot do the work of the risen Christ unless we abide in Him, we must continuously pray and draw power from the spiritual Vine of the risen, living Christ (John 15:1-16). Jesus had taught the apostles to continuously, and with perseverance, ask, seek, and knock because, everyone who does will receive, find, the door will open, and God the Father will give them the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:9-13; Matthew 7:7-11).

“Where is He?”

The New Testament begins with wise men asking the question, “Where is He?” (Matthew 2:2) Jesus told us that He was going to build His church and all the powers of Hell would not be able to stop Him from building His church (Matthew 16:18). The Apostle John records a supernatural Revelation of the risen, living Christ walking among His churches (Revelation 1:13-2:1). That Revelation answers the question of the wise men: He is “in the midst” of the churches. That is where He is and what He is doing today. He began that miraculous work in the Book of Acts and He is still doing that work today.

How do we measure the health, or take the “vital signs” of our local churches today? First of all, we should look for evidences of these fingerprints. When we do see these fingerprints in our churches, on a scale of one to ten, we should regularly give our church a number for ministries that relate to: evangelism, teaching, fellowship, worship, and prayer and see how our church compares to the first generation church we find in the book of Acts.

We will then have a way to measure the degree to which we can say that our church is a visible expression of the church the risen, living Jesus Christ is building in this world today.

Chapter Three

“The Visible Patterns of the Invisible Church”

Almost immediately, the New Testament Church encountered threats and challenges. As we observe how the leaders of the church cope with those problems - persecution from without and problems from within - certain patterns begin to emerge. These patterns are some of those examples and warnings that Paul told us are intended to instruct and warn us today when we read biblical history (I Corinthians 10:11).

For example, the pattern of giving is established very early in the history of the church. We read that those who own property sell

their property and bring the proceeds of the sale to the apostles so that distribution might be made according to the needs of the believers. They gave more than a tithe or an offering, or even a sacrifice; they gave everything they had.

We also observe the pattern of civil disobedience. This is an interesting pattern. Jesus said, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” (Matthew 22:21) God will not ask for that which is Caesar’s, but there are times when Caesar will ask for that which is God’s. When Caesar asks for that which is God’s, this New Testament example teaching of Jesus tells us we cannot give it to him.

The apostles were commanded by Jesus to preach and teach the name and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But the religious and civil authorities commanded them to never speak the name of Jesus again (Acts 4:18). The first time this happened, the apostles essentially responded to these authorities, that as simple laymen they were not qualified to say whether it was right to listen to God, or to their rulers. Then they had a prayer meeting. The next time the authorities forbid them to preach the name and the Gospel of Christ, they immediately respond, “We must obey God rather than men!” (Acts 5:29) That is civil disobedience!

There are times when to be true to their calling, the followers of Christ must suffer the consequences of obeying God and Christ, rather than men. Over the centuries and all over the world today, believers are suffering those bitter consequences. More believers

have died for their faith since the 1940’s and the end of World War Two, than in all the rest of church history.

We also see the pattern of church discipline emerge in the church. There was a man and wife named Ananias and Sapphira who sold a farm. They lied to the apostles about the amount of that sale. In this story, Peter showed amazing discernment. He asked, “Why have you conspired to lie to the Holy Spirit? You have not just lied to a man; you have lied to God!” (Acts 5:3,4) When separately confronted with their sin, both Ananias and Sapphira fell dead!

This severe church discipline kept the church pure, and put the holy reverent fear of God in the disciples. And the people of the secular culture in Jerusalem knew it was very serious business to consider becoming a follower of Christ and a member of the church (5:11-13).

In Acts Chapter Six a pattern emerges that must be applied when a church grows. The church was growing rapidly, with many people living together in a communal arrangement. When thousands of people are living together who have to be fed several times a day, you must have a food services program (6:1). The apostles found themselves being drawn into managing this program, and that was pulling them away from their ministry of the Word of God. So the apostles called a meeting of the great multitude and said to them: “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the Word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among

you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word.” (6:2-4)

When this had been done, they commissioned those who had been selected to see to this business and they devoted themselves entirely to prayer and the ministry of the Word of God. This decision was greatly blessed by God and resulted in a dynamic spread of the Gospel in the city of Jerusalem. This is the origin of what many churches call their deacons today. It was the responsibility of elected deacons to see to the business of the church so that the people with pastoral gifts could be free to give themselves to pastoral ministry.

The precedent set by the church on this occasion is establishing the principle that there is a place in the body of Christ for every disciple. All people who have the energizing unction of the Holy Spirit have spiritual gifts. Some of those gifts are pastoral, and some are practical spiritual gifts.

The practical gifts, which the New Testament describes as “helps”, or “governments”, or “administrations”, are just as spiritual as the gifts of the person who is preaching, teaching, or evangelizing. However, every disciple should stand in his or her place and exercise the gifts God has given them. A church that accepts and applies this pattern will be blessed, and that church will grow.

Have you discovered your spiritual gift pattern? Once you have done so, give yourself wholly to the ministries your spiritual gifts equip you to do for the Lord. This pattern sometimes involves

disciples who are proven faithful in practical ministries, and then cross over into pastoral ministry. The martyr Stephen and Philip the evangelist are examples of this cross over pattern where they began and were faithful as deacons and then became evangelists.

Another pattern that emerges in the Book of Acts is martyrdom. A famous quote from church historians is: “The blood of the martyrs is the seed that makes the church grow.” Stephen gives his life for a sermon (7:54-60). When Stephen died for his faith, a man named Saul of Tarsus was holding the coats of those who stoned him. The conversion of this man Saul may have been influenced by the martyrdom of Stephen. That is what is meant by the quote above about the blood of the martyrs growing the church.

Another obvious and beautiful pattern in the church is healing. There is a tremendous emphasis on healing in Luke’s history of the church as there was in his Gospel. According to Luke, the risen, living Christ is now working through the apostles to continue this ministry of healing.

Peter and John meet a man sitting at the gate of the temple. He is a forty-year-old paralytic. All his life, someone has carried him to the gate of the temple where he would beg for alms. When Peter and John are going into the temple, this man is there with his cup. Peter says, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk!” (3:6)

We read that the man not only gets up and walks. He goes into the temple leaping and jumping and praising God! A proud and

prestigious church leader recently observed that the church can no longer say, “Silver and gold I do not have.” A humble servant of the Lord responded, “Neither can the church today say, ‘In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk!’”

This healing, like Jesus’ healing of the man at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5), gives the apostles a tremendous opportunity to preach the Gospel. The religious authorities are shocked when they see these illiterate fishermen preaching in the Temple. However, as they arrest the apostles and forbid their preaching, the one thing they cannot deny is the fact that the apostles have performed this true miracle of healing.

At the root of this healing ministry is something even more basic. It is the supernatural Holy Spirit charisma of the New Testament church. Observe this pattern in the first generation church: It is only because of the power given to the church that you see the performance given by the church that cannot be denied by the world.

The Pattern of Martyrdom

Stephen, who was elected as one of the first deacons, crossed over from the practical to the pastoral and became a great preacher. As he preaches his magnificent sermon before the Sanhedrin, the ruling religious council of the Jews, Stephen is obviously preaching in the power of the Holy Spirit. Preaching is not only a matter of diligent study and clever delivery. Preaching is a spiritual gift, and if

it is not practiced with the unction of the Holy Spirit, it is not really the anointed preaching we see modeled in this book.

In his sermon, Stephen gives a survey of the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament. He demonstrates a remarkable grasp of Scripture. He starts with Abraham; he mentions Isaac, Jacob, he covers the ministries of Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David and Solomon. He covers the whole span of Hebrew history up to the Babylonian Captivity.

The purpose of Stephen’s sermon is not evangelistic, although it is eventually a fruitful sermon, as we will see. The purpose of Stephen’s sermon is to tell the religious leaders that they have rejected the grace, love, and salvation of God. They have rejected every good thing that God has ever tried to do for them. The height of their rejection has been their rejection of Stephen’s Lord Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

As Stephen overviews all this Hebrew history for these religious leaders, the point he is making is that they have always rejected the salvation of God. The response to Stephen’s sermon was predictable:

“At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God. “Look” he said, “I see heaven opened and the Son of

Man standing at the right hand of God. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

“Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ When he had said this, he fell asleep.”

As Stephen dies for his sermon, he shows us that he is Spirit-filled. He has a tremendous vision of God and Christ. And he dies the way his Lord had inspired him to die, praying for the forgiveness of those who were taking his life.

At the stoning of Stephen we meet the greatest missionary, the greatest planter of churches, pastor, teacher and author in the history of the church of Jesus Christ. When we meet him he is holding the coats of the people who stoned Stephen to death. He is Saul of Tarsus, who becomes the Apostle Paul.

When we get to know that young man named Saul of Tarsus, we will realize how and why the sermon and example of Stephen would have so dynamically impacted his life. Saul was “a Pharisee of the Pharisees” and was fanatically committed to the preservation of the orthodox doctrines of the Jewish faith. He hated what he considered to be a new sect that was a threat to Judaism.

However, in addition to being impressed by the Christ-like way Stephen died for his convictions, being a great orthodox Jewish scholar of Old Testament Scripture, he would have admired and been convicted by the anointed summary and orthodox applications of Hebrew history presented in Stephen’s sermon.

Would you be willing to die for Jesus Christ as Stephen did? Would you have the grace to forgive your enemies? Perhaps a harder question is, “Are you willing, and do you have the grace to live for Jesus Christ?”

Chapter Four

“How to Make a Disciple”

Precisely how do we make a disciple? There is a beautiful story in the Book of Acts that answers that question for us (Acts 8:26-40). A man named Philip, who like Stephen was one of the first deacons, becomes another example of a believer with a practical spiritual gift pattern who crosses over to a pastoral pattern when he becomes an evangelist. He travels into Samaria and has a very fruitful evangelistic ministry there.

During this extremely fruitful evangelistic crusade, through an angel, the Lord makes Philip know: “I want you to go out into the wilderness to a place called Gaza.” (Acts 8:26) Even though evangelists usually go to cities, Philip obeyed and went out into the wilderness.

When Philip arrived in the desert, he saw a royal procession of chariots crossing the wilderness. The Spirit led him to one particular chariot. The Greek in this passage indicates “this

particular chariot as distinct from the other chariots.” That is how we know there was a caravan of chariots. When Philip approached that chariot, he found the treasurer of Ethiopia reading the Fifty-third Chapter of Isaiah from a scroll!

This Ethiopian is a politician, the treasurer of Ethiopia. He is reading a scroll of Isaiah. He had apparently traveled all the way from Ethiopia to Jerusalem because he had a spiritual hunger. When he got to Jerusalem, he found the same kind of loveless religion Jesus confronted so severely. He did not find spiritual reality in Jerusalem, but he did manage to get a copy of the scroll of Isaiah. He is reading aloud from that scroll: “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:6)

Philip asks him: “Do you understand what you are reading?” The Ethiopian replies, “How can I, unless someone explains it to me?” (30, 31) Philip gets up in the chariot with him and they ride along together, with Philip explaining how that passage from Isaiah was proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Philip evidently brings his presentation of the Gospel to a verdict by telling him that faith in Jesus is professed by water baptism. We read that the Ethiopian says, “There is water right there. Why can I not be baptized right now?” Philip replies, “If you believe with all your heart, you may be.”

This is the great prerequisite for water baptism: “Believe with all your heart.” We call this “believer’s baptism.” The church is

divided about the method for baptizing believers. However, the important issue in baptism is not the mode but the meaning of baptism. The Great Commission should be read, “Make disciples, going, preaching, baptizing, and teaching those disciples.”

Baptism is like a wedding ceremony. When a man asks a woman to marry him and she agrees, that is a very sacred moment for them. When they are married, they invite family, relatives and friends to a ceremony that is a public announcement of a commitment that has already been made privately. When a man like this Ethiopian believes, that is the private commitment that is announced publicly when he is baptized.

When Jesus made baptism part of the Great Commission, He made it impossible for any of us to follow Him and keep our profession of faith in Him a secret. How does one profess faith in Jesus Christ? Do we join a church? Do we respond to an invitation that is given by an evangelist? It is important to note that baptism does not save us, but baptism is the public confession of faith commanded by Jesus Christ.

A Story about Peter

Before we consider the conversion of Saul of Tarsus (Chapter 9), we must consider a story about Peter (Chapters 10,11) that should be surveyed with the Philip’s story because both these stories show us how to make a disciple. While Peter is taking a nap on a rooftop, he has a vision of a sheet that is tied at four corners. On

the sheet there are many animals that Jews were forbidden to eat. Three times a voice says to Peter, “Get up, Peter, kill and eat.” (10:13) Each time, Peter says, “Never! I have never eaten that kind of meat.”

Then there is a knock at the door downstairs. The Holy Spirit makes Peter know that he is to go with the men who are knocking, asking no questions. These men are the servants of a Roman Centurion named, Cornelius. They explain that their master had a vision while he was praying in which he was told that if he would send servants to the house of Simon the Tanner and ask for a man named Peter, he would come and tell him and his household what they had to do to be saved.

Think of the obstacles of prejudice facing Peter. Cornelius is not only a Gentile. He is Peter’s enemy. The Jews referred to Gentiles as dogs because they believed that a non-Jewish person had about as much spiritual awareness as a dog. In fact, it was forbidden for Jews to even go into the home of a non-Jewish person. And now Peter is being directed to preach salvation in the home of a Gentile Roman Centurion!

When Peter goes to the home of Cornelius, he finds that Cornelius has gathered his household together to hear Peter preach the Gospel. Peter demonstrates that he now understands the meaning of the vision. Those unclean animals were unclean people - Gentiles. Peter’s first words are, “God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean.” (28)

While Peter is preaching the Gospel, there is an event that is similar to the Day of Pentecost. We read that “While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.” (44) In the next chapter, when Peter describes for the apostles and other believers how the Holy Spirit fell on the household of Cornelius, he adds the words, “As on us at the beginning.” (11:15) It is significant that this Pentecost happens when the risen Christ is crossing over boundaries of prejudice between the sectarian Jewish world and the Gentile world while building His church.

The Three-link Chain

In these stories about Philip and Peter, we find a formula that shows us how to make a disciple. These inspired examples show us that it is as if there were a “three-link chain” between God and those who are lost. The first link is the Holy Spirit. The second link is the Word of God, and the third link is the servant of God - the disciple-maker.

To make a disciple, the Holy Spirit must be working in and through the disciple-maker, prompting that disciple to present the Gospel of Jesus Christ to an individual. The Holy Spirit must also be working in that lost person, creating a spiritual hunger as he was in the Ethiopian and in the Roman Centurion.

The Word of God, or the Gospel must be in place as the tool God promises to use in the making of a disciple. When the seed of

the Word of God is received in a heart of faith, a spiritual conception takes place (I Peter 1:22, 23).

Then, the servant of the Lord, or the disciple-maker, must also be in place. A willing, available, and faithful, disciple-maker - like Philip and Peter - is the third essential link in the three-link chain between God and lost people. It is exciting and awesome to think that God chooses people, like you and me to be His agents to share the Good News with the lost.

What are the evidences that the Holy Spirit is working in the lives of lost people who have never heard or accepted the Gospel? In these two examples Luke gives us the evidences of spiritual activity are extremely obvious. They may not be as obvious in our interaction with lost people, but we will see them if are praying and looking for such evidences.

A good question to ask that will lead to a conversation to where we can naturally share the Gospel is this question: "Are you interested in spiritual things?" The worst thing that can happen is that they will say, "No." If you have the faith and the courage to ask this question you will discover that many people are interested in spiritual things. Lost people need a servant of God who is willing to "get up in the chariot" with them, and help them understand what the Word of God has to say that vitally relates to them about their eternal salvation.

When you see evidences of the Holy Spirit working in a lost person's life, and the Spirit leads you to share the Gospel with them,

are you willing to be the third link in the chain between God and a lost person? I made that commitment to the Lord, thinking that I would not meet many people like the Roman Centurion and the Ethiopian. I was mistaken. Since I made that commitment to God in 1957, I have met many such people and I have seen many of them come to faith in Christ and experience the new birth.

When I was young in my faith, I was very shy and lacking in self-confidence when I began responding to the leading of the Holy Spirit to share the Gospel with individuals. When I understood the concept that I am describing as a three-link chain, I was greatly encouraged to realize, and then to prove many times, that the first two links in this chain are so powerful, the salvation of the lost person does not really depend upon our intelligence, our powers of persuasion or "salesmanship".

We are by far the weakest link in this chain, but for some reason I do not understand, although God can and does sometimes work this miracle without us, He has chosen to use the weak link of human beings to bring lost people to faith and salvation. The risen, living Christ is a Vine looking for branches through which He can produce "the fruit that remains." (John 15:16)

Have you ever shared the good news with others? Are you being obedient to the Great Commission given by Christ? If not I challenge you to ask God to show you how He is already working in the lives of those around you. Then ask Him to give you the

boldness of Peter and Philip to share the message of His grace and mercy with them.

As you share the gospel you will experience the joy of obeying God and being used by God. When we proclaim the good news of Christ with the lost, we are making an eternal difference in their lives. My prayer is that as we study this book of Acts you will be anointed with Holy Spirit power to boldly share the Gospel like Peter, Philip, Paul and others we will study.

Chapter Five

“The Personal Pentecost of Paul”

“Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters (or warrants) from him to the synagogues of Damascus so that if he found any of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

“As he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’ And he said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ Then the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus Whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’

“So he, trembling and astonished said, ‘Lord, what do You want me to do?’ Then the Lord said to him, ‘Arise, and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.’” (Acts 9:1-6)

These words, which are very familiar to some people, describe the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, which is often called his “Damascus Road experience”. You cannot explain this man apart from the word “experience”. As we have already seen, when we meet him, he is the great Christ hater, but this experience on the Damascus Road is the first of several experiences that make him the greatest apostle (missionary) in the history of the church of Jesus Christ.

There are several places in the Book of Acts where Paul will tell us about this first experience. Before hostile mobs, Roman governors, a King and Queen, in religious courtrooms, and in his inspired letters Paul continuously tells us, “I had an experience.”

Paul actually tells us about three experiences that made him the most fruitful apostle in church history. His first experience was his conversion on the road to Damascus. He had an Arabian Desert experience, which he vividly explains in his letter to the Galatians (1:11-2:10). He also had a heavenly experience that profoundly impacted his life. He shares that experience with the Corinthians and with us (II Corinthians 12:1-4). This could have happened when he was stoned at Lystra (14:19,20).

His heavenly experience convinced Paul that we do not have to wait until we die to live in heaven. The theme of his letter to the

Ephesians is, “in heavenly places” by which he means that we can live in the heavenly dimension while we are living out our lives here on earth (Ephesians 1:3). We cannot explain this extraordinary apostle apart from these three experiences.

There are a few very important observations we must make about the first experience of this converted Christ hater. First, Saul hears a voice calling him by name and asking him, “Why are you persecuting Me?” Here, again, we see that the risen Christ is inseparably identified with His church. Saul has been persecuting the church, but the question of the risen Christ is, “Why are you persecuting Me?” The clear message is: “You are persecuting Me when you are persecuting My church.”

Saul responds with the question, “Who are You, Lord?” He did not even know Who he was talking to, but he knew that the One he was talking to was his Lord.

In Saul’s conversion there is a metaphor that helps us understand the concept of “meekness”. From this story we learn that meekness is actually “tameness”. When a horse is wild, and has never had a bit in its mouth, a bridle on its head, or a saddle on its back, that horse has to be tamed. When the horse is tamed, and it reaches the point where it will no longer pull against the bit, but follow the direction of the bit and the bridle, that animal is not weak. A tamed animal is a meek animal.

When the risen Christ tells Saul, “It is hard for you to kick against the goads,” He means, “Why are you pulling against the bit?”

It is tearing up your mouth. It is so hard on you.” This metaphor suggests that before the Damascus Road experience, the Holy Spirit had already been dealing with Saul of Tarsus, speaking to him through the witness of Stephen and other believers he persecuted. Saul shows us he is accepting the control of the bit and bridle or becoming meek, when he asks the question, “Lord, what do You want me to do?” (6)

In Paul’s letters, more than anyone else, he will tell us all that God has done for us in giving us salvation through Christ. But, when he meets Jesus, his question is not, “What are you going to do for me?” His essential question is, “Lord, what do You want me to do for You?”

As a result of his conversion, Paul’s view of life changed dramatically. Among other things, he changed his name. Paul’s Hebrew name Saul meant “mighty one” or “great one”. When he was converted, he decided to use his Roman name, Paul.

This could have been motivated by the fact that he was commissioned to reach non-Jewish believers all over the Roman Empire. Since he was born a Roman citizen, and he wanted to be all things to all men, it could have been a strategic decision for him to use his Roman name. However, we cannot overlook the fact that Saul meant mighty or great one, and Paul meant “little one” or “nobody”! When Saul was converted to Paul, he obviously experienced what it means to be “poor in spirit.” (Matthew 5:3)

Later he essentially wrote to the Philippians: “I had certain

things I “was really going after, things that meant a lot to me. But when I met Jesus, those things meant nothing to me. In fact, I considered those things to be like human waste compared to some things that meant nothing to me before I met Christ on the Damascus Road - like knowing Him and finding out what He wanted me to do - these new things became my magnificent obsession.” (Philippians 3: 1-11)

The important issue where experience is concerned is not the details of our experience. The primary issue is: what are the results of my experience? Experience is not an end but a means to an end. Experience is simply a door we walk through that makes us better servants of Christ. In the Book of Acts, Paul tells the details of his Damascus Road experience several times. What he writes to the Philippians emphasizes the results of his Damascus Road experience.

Some believers are what I call “utilitarian” believers. A utility is something we use. Believers can use God the way we use water, a candle, electricity, a bicycle, or a city bus. Without realizing it, we may become followers of Christ because we believe He will solve all our problems. Of course, when we follow Christ, He does solve our most serious problems. But let me ask you a question: “As you follow Christ, are you asking Him what He is going to do for you or like Paul are you asking your Lord and Savior what you can do for Him?”

After the story of the conversion of Paul, we read about what we might call the “follow-up” to his conversion. God goes to an old

man named Ananias and says, “I want you to go baptize a man named Saul of Tarsus.” The name “Saul of Tarsus” struck terror into the heart of this old man. He responds, “Lord, I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on Your name.” (Acts 9:13,14) God commands: “Go! This man is My chosen instrument to carry My name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.” (15)

Speaking figuratively, God unrolls a scroll and shows Ananias His plan for the life of Saul of Tarsus. Make the observation, that God does not do that for Saul. He simply tells Saul: “Go into Damascus and when you get to Damascus I will tell you the next directive I have for you.” (6) The devotional application for us here is that God could show us His entire will for our lives if He wanted to. But He does not usually do that. He reveals His will to us as He did to Saul - one day and one directive at a time.

Two of the most beautiful words in the Book of Acts are the words spoken by Ananias when he goes into the house where Saul of Tarsus is waiting for him. As soon as Ananias understands that this great enemy of the church has been converted, he says, “Brother Saul.” What we see here is what the church of Jesus Christ is all about: the grace of God changing lives!

The Desert Experience of Paul

We face a chronological challenge as we read the story of Paul's conversion experience. We get the impression that as soon as Paul is converted, he begins preaching boldly in the name of Jesus Christ in Damascus and Jerusalem. However, we must insert a great parenthesis between Paul's conversion and his preaching ministry. We must account for what Paul tells the Galatians about going into Arabia after he was converted (Galatians 1:11-21).

Scholars disagree about the length of Paul's desert experience in Arabia, but most agree that he claims he was there for a minimum of three years. Paul claims that the risen Christ spent three years with him and taught him all the things that he writes in His letters, which make up half of the New Testament. Then he apparently went back to Damascus, and eventually to his hometown of Tarsus.

Paul tells us that fourteen years after his conversion, he went up to Jerusalem and met all the other apostles for the first time (Galatians 2:1-10). Paul apparently convinced them that he had been with Jesus for three years just as they had. He must have told the apostles things about Jesus that only someone who had been with Jesus could know. It was then they decided that Paul would preach the Gospel to the Gentile world, and the other apostles would preach to the Jews.

I would not have done it that way. I would have sent Paul, the converted Rabbi and scholar, to the Jews, and illiterate fishermen like Peter, James, and John to the Gentile barbarians. But God does

not do things as we would. He seems to delight in using ordinary people to do extraordinary things. He sent the converted Rabbi and scholar to the Gentile barbarians, and illiterate apostles to the Rabbis and scholars.

Approximately the first half of the Book of Acts presents Peter as the leading Apostle, and the rest of the book profiles the life and ministry of the Apostle Paul. As you read the story of the conversion of Paul in this history book, be sure to make a detour to read his claims about his desert experience in the first two chapters of his letter to the Galatians. When he makes those claims in Galatians, he brings us to a verdict when he declares, "Before God, I lie not."

You must make a decision about Paul. Paul is either a liar, or he is an apostle. He actually claims that he labored more fruitfully than the other apostles (I Corinthians 15:9,10). The undeniable reality is that he was more fruitful than the other apostles. He is the author of nearly half the books of the New Testament we will survey when we conclude this survey of the Book of Acts. Reserve your judgment about Paul until you have read and seriously considered the profound content of his inspired letters.

I began my reading of the Bible in 1949 by reading the second half of the Book of Acts in preparation for a survey of all the inspired letters of Paul. I have become thoroughly convinced that only the risen Christ could have revealed to this amazing, extraordinary man of God, the sublime truth I have continued to find over many decades in Paul's inspired letters.

Meet Barnabas

Luke primarily focuses the ministries of Peter and Paul as he writes his history of the first generation of the church. However, in addition to these two great leaders, there are many other people he thinks we should know about to appreciate the beginnings of the church of the risen, living Christ. One of them is a man named Barnabas, which means “Son of Encouragement.” (4:36)

Following the example of Jesus, the apostles actually changed his name from Joseph to Barnabas, which describes his spiritual gift pattern and his ministry. We will always find him living up to this new name he was given, faithfully supporting others and encouraging them to do what their risen Lord was calling them to do. Barnabas was the man who was responsible for launching Paul into his miraculous missionary ministry.

We read that he was working in the church at Antioch, making disciples of new converts. The church had experienced a tremendous growth in the number of believers because the Holy Spirit was working there mightily. There were so many new converts that Barnabas realized the church there needed the unique and extraordinary teaching gifts of the converted Rabbi, Saul of Tarsus. He therefore went to Tarsus and searched until he found Paul, then brought him to Antioch and installed him in that teaching ministry. We read that Barnabas interceded for this former enemy of the church with the other believers, who were understandably skeptical about bringing Paul to Antioch (Acts 9:26).

We must remember that there never would have been an Apostle Peter if it had not been for a man named Andrew. It was Andrew who brought his brother Simon and introduced him to Jesus. Andrew is pictured again working one on one, bringing people to Jesus when it is he who discovers the little boy, who gives up his lunch of five biscuits and two sardines that feed the hungry multitude. In the same way, we can say that Paul may never have had his great ministry if it had not been for this “Son of Encouragement,” Barnabas.

Paul and Barnabas are commissioned and sent out by the Church of Antioch to begin their extremely fruitful missionary travels together (Acts 13:1-3). However, as they are about to embark on a second missionary journey, they have a strong disagreement that terminates their ministry as a team of disciples who are yoked together with Christ and each other. Barnabas wants to take his nephew, John Mark, with them on that second missionary journey. John Mark had been with them on their first journey, but had deserted them when the persecution started. Paul is against taking John Mark.

The disagreement between Paul and Barnabas is so sharp over this issue that they part company. Paul takes Silas and travels in one direction; Barnabas takes John Mark and travels in another direction. Throughout church history there is a sense in which the greatest problem of missionaries has been other missionaries. The evil one knows that we cannot win the world if we lose each other.

This is why Jesus placed such great emphasis on working out our relationships with our brother (Matthew 5:23,24; 18:15-17).

However, it is important to read some of the very last words written by the Apostle Paul from a horrible dungeon in the dreaded Mamertine prison in Rome. They are addressed to Timothy: “Bring John Mark with you. He is a profitable minister.” What is the story behind this young man, becoming a “profitable minister?” Scholars believe the answer to that question is that Barnabas continued to minister to John Mark after Paul gave up on him. John Mark becomes the man who writes the second Gospel because Barnabas was a “Son of Encouragement.”

There always have been, there are now, and there always will be many people in the church who need someone to encourage them and minister to them in the context of a one-on-one relationship. Are you willing to be there for such a person? If you are a young believer, you need a Barnabas. If you are a mature believer, you should be encouraging and mentoring a John Mark. As you have opportunity, and as the Holy Spirit directs you, always follow the example of Barnabas and encourage those around you - especially new believers - to be everything their Lord and Savior wants them to be.

Chapter Six

“The Patterns of Pentecost Plant the Church”

According to Luke, there are crucial junctures in the spread of the Gospel. We read of one of those junctures in Chapter Sixteen. While Paul is traveling on his second missionary journey, he desires to enter Asia and preach the Gospel. However, we read, that he and his companions, were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to enter Asia. During the night, in a vision Paul sees a man of Macedonia who is begging him to: “Come over to Macedonia and help us.”

After Paul has seen the vision, we know Luke has joined the missionary team when we read: “Immediately, we got ready to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the Gospel to them.” (Acts 16:7-10) Although Paul and his companions will travel into Asia soon, it is very important to the Spirit that they must reach Macedonia before they reach Asia.

It is at this juncture Paul has his first ministry to the Galatians. When you consider what Paul wrote to the Galatians regarding the health problems he was experiencing at this time, we can assume that the Holy Spirit used Paul’s health problem to forbid him to enter Asia (Galatians 4:13-15). This is especially reasonable to assume because his beloved physician Luke joined him at this time.

The first city they visit as they enter Macedonia is Philippi. You would think that since it was a man in Paul’s vision who was

pleading, “Come over and help us,” that he will find hundreds of men eagerly waiting to hear the Gospel. Instead, he finds a small group of women by a river who are having a prayer meeting. Paul begins with what the Lord has obviously given him, preaching the Gospel to these Jewish women.

One of the women was Lydia, a “seller of purple”. (14) That means she was a seamstress who made clothes for royal families. We read that when Paul opened the Word of God, the Lord “opened her heart.” (14) Then she opened her home to Paul and his missionary team. Lydia’s home then became the first church in Europe. There are and have been thousands of magnificent church buildings in Europe, but in heaven, this little Jewish seamstress will be able to claim that her home was the first church in Europe.

It is in the city of Philippi that Paul and Silas were arrested, cruelly beaten, and thrown in prison (22-24). Despite this punishment, we read that at midnight Paul and Silas pray and sing praises to the Lord and that all the prisoners hear them singing. Suddenly, at midnight, there is a tremendous earthquake! All the prisoners’ shackles fall off, and all the prison doors are opened. That is a very strange earthquake!

When the jailer wakes up in the middle of the night and sees the doors of the prison open, he draws his sword and is going to kill himself, but Paul says to him, “Do not harm yourself! We are all here!” The jailer asks them that great question, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” Paul then responds with that great answer: “Believe in

the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved - you and your household.”

The next words we read are: “Then they spoke the Word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them, and the whole family was filled with joy, because they had come to believe in God.” (28-34)

The way of salvation has never been stated more clearly than it is in those words: “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.” I was saved and became a disciple of Jesus Christ in 1949 when I heard those words preached for the first time. I believe Paul has now met the man in the vision that directed him into Macedonia.

After the conversion of the jailer, the magistrates send word that Paul is to be released and to leave the city (35, 36). However, Paul refuses to leave in that way and at that time. Since he had been beaten as a Roman citizen, without a trial, he demands that the magistrates come and personally escort him and Silas out of the town. He leaves Philippi in the way and at the time of his own choice.

Paul has not only seen Christ turn the city of Philippi upside down. His favorite church has been established in the city of Philippi. This church is the support base that makes it possible for Paul to reach out to churches in cities like Corinth, Ephesus, and

Thessalonica. He uses the faithful stewardship patterns of the Philippians as a model and an example for other churches (II Corinthians 8,9). Paul practiced his trade as a tentmaker rather than accept support from believers who were not mature in their motives, questioned his right to call himself an apostle, and were not worthy of being partners with him in his ministry.

As you read the story of Paul in the city of Philippi, never forget these great words: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved - you and your household.” Observe that these words challenge us to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus means that we believe He is our Savior. Christ means that we believe our Savior is the Messiah. Lord means that we have made our Messiah Savior our Lord and Master.

Do you personally believe that Jesus is your Savior and Messiah? And have you made Him your Lord? If you have never done that before, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved - you and your household.”

Chapter Seven

“The Preaching of Paul”

When Paul arrives in the city of Athens, his spirit is deeply stirred when he sees people everywhere worshiping idols (Acts 17:16). One historian wrote that it was easier to find an idol than it was to find a man in the city of Athens visited by Paul. The idol worship deeply troubles Paul because he knows these idols are not gods, and that these people are not coming to know the true God through these idols.

Paul has a magnificent obsession, which establishes the pattern of his evangelistic strategy in the cities he evangelizes. He always goes to the synagogue first and proclaims to the Jews that: “Jesus is the Christ.” He was a Rabbi and had credentials to prove it. So he would go to the synagogue, get permission, then preach and teach the Gospel to the Jews. That was always Paul’s strategy - “to the Jew first, and then also to the Greek.” (Romans 1:16) Even though Paul was called to minister to the non-Jewish world, he had a great burden for the Jewish people and he always preached first to the Jews. We understand why he always goes to the Jew first when we read his description of his burden for the Jews in his letter to the Romans (9:1-5).

The second part of his strategy was to go to the marketplace and share the Gospel where people gathered in large numbers. We read that, “The Athenians and the strangers who were there spent

their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.” (Acts 17:21) The Greeks were philosophers. They loved to debate and argue deep, intellectual concepts, and they especially loved to hear something new. So Paul goes to the marketplace every day and shares the Gospel with anyone who will listen to him.

A third dimension of his strategy was to present the Gospel to influential community leaders. Since Paul was one of the greatest minds of his generation, he was very effective in reaching these leaders. As he implements his strategy in Athens, he is eventually invited to a beautiful and prestigious place on the top of Mars Hill that was known as the Areopagus. The Areopagus was a place where only outstanding people were invited to debate. It was also used as a courtroom and it overlooked the city of Athens. When Paul is invited to speak in the Areopagus on Mars Hill he preaches a very eloquent sermon. He begins: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: To the Unknown God. Therefore, the One Whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you.” (22, 23)

This is really very clever. Paul compliments the people of Athens for the fact that they are religious. Then he says essentially, “I saw that one of your gods had an inscription that means there is at least one god that you acknowledge you do not know. That is the God I am going to tell you about.”

Paul then preaches that we are the offspring of the God Who created the heavens and the earth. God could not possibly therefore be made of gold, silver, stone, or wood. He quotes their Greek poets, because even their own poets said that we are the offspring of God. He quotes their philosophers, and at the end of his sermon, he proclaims the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When Paul preaches the resurrection, we read: “When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, “We will hear you again of this matter.” So Paul departed from among them. However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.” (32-34)

Scholars are not agreed in the way they evaluate Paul’s sermon on Mars Hill. Some scholars believe he succumbed to the pressures of the Greek intellectual culture when he quoted their philosophers and poets, and the evangelistic results were therefore meager. There is no Epistle of Paul to the Athenians, nor does he make reference to a church that was planted in Athens as in other cities like Corinth and Ephesus. Other scholars disagree. I am personally convinced that Paul grew in his philosophy of evangelistic preaching as a result of his experience in Athens.

The Gospel Goes to Corinth

From Athens, Paul travels directly to Corinth. Corinth was a morally decadent city. In the first-century world, to call someone a

“Corinthian” was to accuse them of being a morally decadent person. As Paul contemplated preaching the Gospel in a city like Corinth, he was filled with fear (I Corinthians 2:3). But God reassured Paul in a vision, “Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city.” (Acts 18:9,10)

Paul had a personal Pentecost to prepare him for his ministry in Corinth. There is a sense in which we can say that he had an experience that prepared him for his ministries to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and to the Corinthians. These experiences were divine interventions that assured Paul of the reality that the risen, living Christ was with him as he spread the Gospel to these strategic cities. The signs and wonders on the Day of Pentecost continued like ripples to energize the initial proclamation of the Gospel Jesus had commissioned His church to preach. Patterns of Pentecost planted the church in the first generation of church history.

The perspective I have shared with you on that sermon Paul preached in Athens must be related to perspective Paul himself shares with the believers in Corinth. He writes to them that when he came to Corinth, he had determined not to use “enticing words of man’s wisdom,” but to simply present a demonstration of the Spirit and of power (I Corinthians 2:1-5). When Paul preached that sermon on Mars Hill he did use “enticing words of man’s wisdom.” He quoted their poets and their philosophers and preached a very clever sermon there.

The Greek word for “preaching” literally means, “to make an announcement”, the way the decree of a king was announced to his subjects in the villages and cities of his kingdom. As you study the preaching of Paul in the next six chapters of this inspired history book, make the observation that what Paul learned between Athens and Corinth was a spiritual dateline in the formation of his strategy for preaching the Gospel.

I am convinced that between his ministries in Athens and Corinth Paul experienced a crisis that profoundly influenced his strategy for the preaching of the Gospel. Paul realized emphatically that preaching was a spiritual ministry, and all he needed to do was announce the Gospel facts about Jesus Christ. He closes his letter to the Corinthians with another statement about the Gospel he preached when he came to their city (15:1-4). He wrote to the Romans: “I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus Christ because that Gospel, itself, is the power of God to those who believe it.” (Romans 1:16)

After Athens and Corinth, Paul simply announces the Gospel message and frequently tells his own personal experience of how he came to believe that Gospel.

Paul in Ephesus

Paul’s great ministry in the city of Ephesus was the fulfillment of his desire to reach Asia with the Gospel. At Ephesus, Paul enters into a very fruitful church-planting ministry. Scholars believe the church planted at Ephesus became the mother church

from which six more churches were born, which are mentioned in the Book of Revelation. The churches at Pergamus, Thyatira, Smyrna, Philadelphia, Laodicea, and Sardis could have been satellites of the church at Ephesus. The letter of Paul to the Colossians may have been addressed to a church that was also a daughter church of the church at Ephesus.

One of the reasons the church planted in Ephesus was so fruitful is that Paul had a “seminary” there. We read that he taught in “the school of one Tyrannus for the space of two years.” (Acts 19:10) One ancient manuscript tells us Paul was able to borrow and teach in this school facility from 11 a. m. until 5 p. m. every day when the school was not being used. In that part of the world, the workday is interrupted for several hours of siesta when it is too hot to work or hold classes in a school.

Paul may have trained the pastors of these satellite churches in that school. This “seminary” may explain why Paul stayed in Ephesus for more than three years which was longer than he stayed in any of the cities where he planted churches. The church at Ephesus was so thoroughly taught by this pastor and teacher, in the first half of his marvelous letter to them, he frequently exhorts them to “remember” what he had taught them.

One of the most touching insights into Paul and his ministry in this history book is found in Chapter Twenty. He is on his way to Jerusalem, where the Spirit has made him know he will be arrested, bound and beaten (Acts 20:22-24). When he gets to a place called

Miletus, which is near Ephesus, he realizes he will never again be near these believers in which he has invested so much of his ministry. He therefore sends for the elders of the church, and there, on a beach at Miletus, gives them a farewell address. Paul’s last words to these elders are: “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. I have not coveted anyone’s silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” (32-35).

Since Paul had supported himself in Ephesus, no one could accuse him of preaching and teaching because he wanted to get gifts from them. In fact, Paul not only supported himself, he supported his entire missionary party because he wanted them to learn the truth of the words of Jesus: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” That statement of Jesus should represent our motivation for hard work. If we work hard and earn money, we will have something to give and can therefore learn this “ninth beatitude” of Jesus.

When Paul told these elders they were not going to see his face again, “They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him.” (37) That is a beautiful insight into the koinonia, or the intimate fellowship that existed in the first generation of the church.

Chapter Eight

“Patterns of Paul”

In Chapter Twenty-one, we read that Paul arrives in Jerusalem and begins to preach. In response to his preaching, he is attacked by a huge mob (27). They are actually beating Paul to death when a Roman officer with soldiers moves into the crowd and rescues him. As the soldiers are carrying Paul over their heads into the castle where he will be a prisoner of Rome, Paul begs the colonel to put him down and let him preach, because he sees this as a great opportunity to preach the Gospel. He gives a magnificent sermon, which is recorded in the following chapter.

This is not like his sermon on Mars Hill. Paul does not quote poets and philosophers or use enticing words of man’s wisdom. He bears witness to his own experience of Jesus Christ. The reaction is not mixed. We read: “The crowd listened to Paul,” but then they cried, “Rid the earth of him! He’s not fit to live!” (22:22) When the fury of the mob is aroused again, Paul is taken into the castle.

When the Romans arrested someone, it was a common practice to chain that person to a pole and beat him. They called it “examining by scourging.” As they are about to chain Paul for this examination, he informs the soldiers that he is a Roman citizen. When they learn this the soldiers tell their colonel not to beat him (29). I cannot help but wonder why he did not claim his right of citizenship when he and Silas were arrested and beaten in Philippi.

Perhaps he allowed himself to be beaten there because he wanted the leverage he later used on the magistrates in that city.

When the Romans decide that they cannot beat him, they put him in prison. The next day, they decide they will have a trial before the chief priests and the Sanhedrin. The religious people in that mob who have accused Paul are invited to make their accusations against him in court.

The record of a long series of trials that ultimately places Paul before Caesar begins in Chapter Twenty-three. We see the humanity of Paul as this trial begins. He looks over the courtroom and sees that approximately half the people in the room are Pharisees, and the other half are Sadducees. The Pharisees were the orthodox Jews, and the Sadducees were the liberal Jews. The Sadducees did not believe in resurrection or the supernatural. So Paul makes a clever statement to this evenly divided courtroom. He solemnly proclaims: “My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead.” (Acts 23:6)

When Paul cleverly proclaims the resurrection of the dead, a heated argument erupts between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, with the Pharisees taking Paul’s side. Paul knew that he was being pushed through an unfair, mock trial. So he decided to simply turn the courtroom upside down like he did the city of Philippi. The soldiers had to rescue him again and take him back to prison for his own protection.

Forty of these Jews got together and made a covenant that they would not eat until Paul was dead. Their plan was to ambush Paul and kill him when he was brought down for more questioning (12). Paul's nephew overhears this plot of the Jews, so he comes into the prison and tells Paul about the conspiracy. Then the boy tells the colonel what these forty Jews are planning to do.

The colonel decides to get Paul off his hands. He does not know what he has done or understand the problem the Jews have with Paul, but he knows this man will bring him nothing but trouble. He calls two centurions and says, "Get ready a detachment of two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen, to go to Caesarea at nine tonight. Provide mounts for Paul, so that he may be taken safely to Governor Felix." (23, 24)

Is this not an interesting scene? Under cover of darkness, an eccentric little Jew, surrounded by four hundred and seventy Roman soldiers, who are sneaking him out of a castle, and escorting him down the Mediterranean seacoast from Jerusalem to Caesarea in Palestine.

Before Two Governors

When Paul arrives in Caesarea, he is turned over to the governor, Felix. Felix summons the Jews to come down and formally accuse Paul of his crimes. Here again we have a great message given by the Apostle Paul. On this occasion, when Paul

preaches before the governor and his court, he tells his "God-story", or gives his testimony again.

In response to Paul's presentation, Felix decides there is really no reason for Paul to be considered a criminal. However, he decides to keep Paul under arrest until he can decide what should be done with his unusual prisoner (Acts 24:22,23).

Governor Felix and his wife Drusilla, who is Jewish, are so fascinated with Paul that they ask him for a private hearing. We read that Paul is very happy to do this, but his message is troubling. "As Paul reasoned of righteousness, temperance and judgment to come, Felix trembled, and said, 'Go away for now! When I find it convenient, I will send for you again.'" (24, 25)

The governor was obviously greatly convicted by the Holy Spirit when he heard Paul preach, publicly and in private. He summoned Paul often, but we are told that his motives were to receive money from Paul for his release. We also read that he kept Paul in prison to obtain favor with the Jews.

After two years, Felix died and another governor named Festus took his place. When Governor Festus discovers that he has a famous, religious/political prisoner on his hands, he holds another trial. Paul knows he will never get any justice in courts that are influenced by the Jews of Jerusalem. Therefore, at that trial, Paul demands a hearing before Caesar, which is his right as a Roman citizen (Acts 25:10). The governor says, "You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!" (12)

Before King Agrippa

While Paul is waiting for transportation to Rome, Governor Festus is visited by royalty - a king named Agrippa and his queen, Bernice. After hearing about Paul, they tell Festus they would like to meet him (22). Remember that when the Lord told Ananias about His plan for Paul, He said, “He is going to carry My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel.” (Acts 9:15) That prophecy is fulfilled when Paul meets King Agrippa.

Brought before Agrippa and Bernice, Paul delivers another magnificent sermon. Once again, he tells his story of being converted on the road to Damascus. As Paul is coming to the conclusion of this sermon, the governor bursts out and says, “Paul, you are beside yourself. Much learning is driving you mad!” (Acts 26:24)

This expression “beside yourself” in the Greek really means, “You are eccentric,” or “You are off center.” In fact, Paul was eccentric. He did have another center around which his life revolved. That center was the risen Christ Whom he had met on the road to Damascus. Like Felix, Governor Festus is also impacted by the words of Paul.

Then Paul turns to the king. King Agrippa is a Jew, so Paul asks, “King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe the prophets.” (27) Agrippa says to Paul, “You almost persuade me to be a Christian.” (28)

Bible scholars do not agree about the meaning of these verses. Some say Agrippa was not speaking sincerely about becoming a Christian, but was actually making a sarcastic remark. I disagree. I am convinced that Agrippa was sincere, because Paul’s response to Agrippa was sincere. Paul says to him, “I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today might become almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains.” (29)

Another reason why I believe that Agrippa was sincere is what we read about the response of the King, Queen and governor after Paul has spoken: “When he had said these things, the king stood up, as well as the governor and Bernice, and those who sat with them; and when they had gone aside, they talked among themselves, saying, “This man is doing nothing deserving of death or chains.” Then Agrippa said to Festus, “This man might have been set free, if he had not appealed to Caesar.” (30-32)

Paul’s Journey to Rome

One of the most exciting stories in this inspired history book is Luke’s account of Paul’s sea voyage to Rome (Acts 27). Paul demonstrates extraordinary leadership and he bears a miraculous witness to all who survive this journey with him. He receives a word from the Lord that because of threatening weather conditions, the ship should not sail when it embarks from Crete on its sea voyage. His Roman captors are not about to listen to the advice of a prisoner.

When the storm Paul predicted hits, after fourteen days of

being helplessly driven by the fierce winds, seasick and unable to eat food, Paul preaches to his terrified, storm-weary fellow survivors (20-26). Paul assures the entire ship population that God has appeared to him in assured him that even though the ship will be destroyed all those aboard the ship will be saved.

When this prophetic word Paul has received from the Lord is fulfilled precisely, the survivors make it to the island of Malta. They build a fire to warm their wet and chilled bodies. A deadly poisonous viper springs from the firewood and attaches itself to his hand. Those who live on Malta believe Paul must have been guilty of terrible crimes and God is now giving him justice. When Paul casually shakes off the viper into the flames and does not die, they decide he must be a god.

When the journey to Rome has been completed on another vessel, Luke presents a beautiful picture of the spiritual community that is the church of the risen, living Christ in Rome. It is touching to read of how the believers in Rome have somehow learned of Paul's expected arrival, and how it comforts and greatly encourages his heart when these believers meet the apostle as he enters the city as a prisoner of Rome.

When the prisoners are delivered to the Roman prison authorities, Paul is permitted to live in a rented house where he stays under house arrest for two years. He is permitted to invite the Jewish religious leaders in Rome to these quarters and, consistent with his strategy of the Jew first, he proclaims the Gospel and his argument

that Jesus is the Christ to them. Some believe, but most of them are hostile toward Paul.

In this rented house, Paul writes his so-called Prison Epistles - Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Philemon - is permitted to receive guests, and the last glimpse Luke gives us of this beloved apostle is that he is preaching the kingdom of God to everyone who will visit and listen to him (28:30, 31).

Except for what we learn from his last letter to Timothy, we must rely on church history to finish the story of Paul's life and ministry. Scholars are persuaded that Paul had his trial before Caesar, was set free, and supported by the Church of Rome to extend his great missionary ministry into Spain.

When Nero burned Rome and blamed it on the Christians, horrible persecution that lasted for three centuries began against the church. All believers were hated and became the bitter enemies of the government and the people of Rome. Peter and Paul became the most hated of all. Paul was arrested again. The scholars believe he was then kept in the dreaded Mamertine prison in Rome where he wrote his last words to Timothy before he was decapitated.

Are you getting acquainted with this great and wonderful apostle? He is the author of the next thirteen New Testament books we will be surveying. We all need heroes and models of faith to imitate. My prayer is that you will come to love Paul as I have since I first read the chapters in the Book of Acts we have now surveyed.

Through the last chapters of this history book, we have the

sense that a great climax is building that will culminate in the visit of Paul to the capital of the Roman Empire and in his trial before Caesar. It is anticlimactic and somewhat of a letdown when this book simply stops but does not end. Scholars believe persecution may be the explanation of why this book abruptly ends. If you observe the “we” pronouns in the last two chapters, it becomes obvious that Luke was with Paul on that awesome sea voyage and when he entered Rome. It may be that Luke was arrested and was unable to finish his excellent history of the first generation of the church.

As I observed at the beginning of this booklet, it may be that by providential design, this history of the church does not end because we are now, and we have been, writing the Twenty-ninth Chapter of Acts ever since the Day of Pentecost when the church of the risen Christ was born.

A Brief Survey of The Letter of Paul to the Romans

Chapter One

“A Birds-eye View of Paul’s Letter to the Romans”

The Apostle Paul wrote thirteen of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. The first of these is his letter to the Romans. Paul did not write his letters in the order in which we find them in the New Testament. Scholars believe this letter was written late in his ministry, when he was mature and had fully developed the theology of the Gospel he preached all over the world and shares with us in this profound letter.

To provide our listeners with notes on the seventy-three radio programs in which I teach the letter of Paul to the Romans, verse by verse, I have written four other booklets. In this short commentary on Romans, I am presenting some notes for those who have heard our brief survey of this inspired letter of Paul. This booklet is a brief summary overview of what Paul teaches in this comprehensive explanation of the Gospel he proclaimed.

The letter of Paul to the Romans is his theological masterpiece. The content of this letter has really very little to do with the church at Rome specifically. Scholars believe Paul addressed

this profound explanation of the Gospel to the believers in Rome, because that city was the capital of the world when he wrote this letter.

This letter is really a comprehensive explanation of the biblical word “justified”. In Jesus’ Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee, He declares the Good News that any man or woman who will pray the sinners prayer – a prayer of repentance and belief in the saving power found in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ for our sins - can go down to their house “justified”. (Luke 18:14) That is the first time we meet this beautiful word in the New Testament. In this letter to the Romans, Paul explains how God works this wonderful miracle of justification in that man or woman who is justified. This letter is the most comprehensive statement about justification we have in the Bible.

To be justified means more than merely being forgiven; it means that God has declared me to be just-as-as-if-I-had-never-sinned at all, and that He has declared me to be righteous. David prophetically introduces the concept in his profound Psalm of confession and repentance when he literally asks God to “unsin his sin.” (Psalm 51:1)

Read the Book of Romans in one sitting and try to determine the inspired and logical argument of the book. I ask you to do this because this letter does have a consistent argument from beginning to end. Ask for the help of the Holy Spirit, and then with much uninterrupted concentration, try to determine the argument of this

inspired statement of the Gospel Jesus Christ commissioned His disciples to preach to every creature, and in every nation on earth (Mark 16:15).

The first four chapters of this letter show how justification relates to the sinner. We will not be interested in being declared righteous until we are convinced that we are unrighteous sinners. Paul therefore presents a very convincing argument that we are all sinners. After convincing us of the bad news that that we are all sinners, Paul proclaims the Good News that God has a plan by which we can be justified.

God’s Plan of Justification

According to Paul, grace is the source of our justification (3:24). The cross of Jesus Christ is the basis of our justification, and the resurrection of Jesus is the guarantee that we are justified (3:25; 4:24, 25). He concludes this part of his argument with these words: “Therefore, being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (5:1) So, faith is the principle by which we personally apply this miracle to our sin and are declared righteous by God. Later in his argument, he will tell us that God is the Author of our justification (8:33).

I must make the observation that there is a cluster of several words that is found one hundred and fifty times in the Bible when this concept of being justified is taught. Those words are “in His sight.” There is a vertical and a horizontal dimension involved in

justification. If we have committed murder, we can be declared righteous in the sight of God by faith, confession and repentance, but we are not released from prison because we are not justified in the sight of society, or in the horizontal of justification before man.

When a trial is held before a judge and without a jury, those who attend that trial may think the defendant is a wonderful person, but if the judge thinks the defendant is guilty, they will go to prison or lose their life. The people may think the defendant is a terrible person, but if the judge believes they are innocent, they will be set free. In the same way, one day we will realize that what really matters is what the Judge of all the earth thinks about our guilt or innocence. That is why it is very Good News to be told that we can be just-as-if-we-had never sinned in His sight.

The next four chapters show how justification relates to the person, who is, in fact, justified by faith. God expects us to get right, be right, and do right when He declares us to be righteous (I John 3:7). In the second four chapters of this letter (5-8), Paul addresses the struggles involved as a person who has been declared righteous finds in the Holy Spirit the power to live a righteous life.

In the next three chapters (9-11), Paul shows how justification relates to the whole world and especially to Israel. These are three of the most important chapters in the Bible on the subject of biblical prophecy. In these three chapters, Paul predicts that Israel will be involved in what is going to happen in the world.

According to Paul, the people of Israel are God's chosen people. They are the greatest illustration in Scripture of the doctrine of election - the teaching that God chooses people for salvation. However, in these same three chapters, Paul writes that the Jews are also the greatest illustration in the Bible of the reality that God has created man to be a creature who makes choices. Paul makes that point when he tells us that the Jews have chosen not to be chosen. They have rejected Jesus Christ and salvation.

Paul writes that, to chastise the Jew for rejecting the Messiah, God has turned to the non-Jewish world and has been saving non-Jewish people ever since the Jews rejected Jesus Christ. When God has saved enough Gentiles to sufficiently chastise Israel for that rejection, God is going to turn back to the Jews again and "all Israel will be saved." (Romans 11:26)

We have seen the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy that there is to be a geographical return of Jews from dispersion all over the world to be the nation of Israel again. Paul joins the Old Testament prophets as he predicts a spiritual return of the Jews to God. That spiritual return has clearly not yet happened. In these three chapters, Paul shows us that when they do experience that spiritual return to God, He is going to relate His plan of justification to the whole world through Israel.

The last four chapters (12-16) are the practical application section of this magnificent letter. Each of Paul's letters divides into two sections. First, you have the teaching part of the letter, and then

you have the practical application part of the letter. Always look for this teaching/application division in Paul's letters.

Even though the first eleven chapters of this letter are the greatest statement of the Gospel Paul left with the church, and the next three chapters are his most difficult to understand theological and prophetic statement, the last four chapters are his most practical and simple applications of Gospel truth to be found in his inspired letters.

Chapter Two **“Like It Was - Like It Is”**

The first chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans is like the first chapter of the Book of Genesis. Scriptures that address beginnings are not telling us something as it was but they are telling us something God wants us to understand as it is today. As Paul relates the concept of justification to the sinner, having made the point that we are all sinners, his next point is that we are all under the judgment of God.

He then presents the relationship between God and man “as it was and as it is” today. God charges that we hold down, or suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18). He means that sinners deliberately suppress the truth because they want to justify their

unrighteous lifestyles. They do not want to see the truth about how they should live their lives God wants to reveal to them. Jesus taught the principle that if any man wills to do, he will know (John 7:17). The reverse is also true. If any man does not will to do, he will not know what God wants him to know.

God makes more charges: They are not grateful; they always change truth into a lie; they worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator; they change natural things into unnatural (homosexuality); they do not even like to retain God in their knowledge, and they not only find pleasure in sinning, but they enjoy seeing other people sin.

Paul then presents some responses of God to man. Paul writes three times that “God gave them up,” or “God gave them over.” (24,26,28) He does not mean that God gave up on man then, or that God gives up on man today. God gave them up, and He gives us up today to what we want. God will not violate the reality that He has designed us to be creatures that make choices.

Think of our lives as a book. It is God's idea to write this book and He has a plan about how this book should be written. But, He hands the pen to us at a certain point and says, “Here, finish the story any way you like. You must live with the consequences, but you can write the story your way if that is what you want to do.”

The Character of Man - Like It Was - Like It Is

Paul presents a tragic profile of what becomes of those who

decide to finish the story their way. He writes that when God gives them up, they become vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart is darkened. Then he summarizes their tragic lives with just two words: “all unrighteous.” As he labels their unrighteousness, he gives us a realistic view of the character of man, as it was, and as it is today (29-32). This tragic, long list of sin demonstrates what Isaiah meant when he wrote that we have all gone astray like sheep, and every one of us has turned to his or her own way (Isaiah 53:6).

The Character of God - Like It Was - Like It Is

Paul actually begins the magnificent argument of this letter while he is sharing these inspired insights regarding our character. He moves from the character of man to the character of God when he tells us that God is righteous, and that the righteousness of God also reveals the wrath of God toward unrighteousness (1:17). In other words, God is the absolute standard of what is right and God demands that His creatures be righteous. God actually condemns unrighteousness in His creatures.

Two attributes of God’s character are revealed in this key passage: the righteousness of God and the wrath of God. Paul now builds on his argument. We have a problem because of the character of God. We are not only sinners, but we are condemned sinners. We have two problems we cannot solve. The Good News of this letter is that God has solved both these problems for us.

After Isaiah declared the bad news that we have all turned to

our own ways, he preached the Good News that “The Lord has laid on Christ the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:6) Paul does the same thing in this statement of the Gospel.

The wrath of God may be defined as “the permanent, consistent attitude of holiness toward that which is not holy,” or “The permanent, consistent attitude of a loving God toward that which is destroying His love objects.” The Scriptures tell us that love is the essence of God. But when those whom He loves are in jeopardy and are about to be destroyed by sin, our loving God is also capable of wrath. God hates and God condemns sin because sin destroys that which God loves.

Chapter Three

“Four Kings and Four Laws”

Paul summarizes the argument of his first four chapters in the first verse of Chapter Five when he writes: “Therefore, being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Introducing the second four chapters of his argument he continues in the next verse: “Through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.” (5: 1, 2) Our faith in the cross of Christ justifies us and gives us peace with God. Faith also gives us access into the

grace that makes it possible for us to stand for Christ in this world, and live a life that exalts Jesus and glorifies God.

Four Kings

Now that we have been justified by faith, how do we live like people who have been declared righteous? Paul begins his answer to that question with a teaching that might be called “Four Kings.” (5:12-21) We could call the first king “King Sin”. We read that King Sin entered this world and “abounded”, or “spread to all men”. (12) Paul does not get into a philosophical discussion of how or why sin entered the world. He simply writes that sin entered, abounded, and reigned.

King Death followed immediately after King Sin. Paul tells us later that, “The wages of sin is death.” (6:23) Sin always has consequences, and those consequences are not good. One of those consequences is literal death. Death is also a metaphor meaning that sin always pays horrible wages. Sooner or later we must all sit down to a banquet of consequences. King Death always follows King Sin.

The first two Kings are the bad news, but the next two Kings are the Good News. According to Paul, there is a third King Who entered, abounded, and reigned in life, and His name is Jesus Christ. King Jesus conquered King Sin on the cross, and conquered King Death when He rose from the dead.

Then Paul has more Good News. The fourth king is King You. By faith, you can enter into life in Christ. You can abound in

Christ by faith. And those who enter into life in Christ, and receive by grace and faith the gift of righteousness, shall “Reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.” In other words, it is possible for you and me to enter by faith into Christ in such a way that we can reign in life through Him (5:17). Jesus Christ said, “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.” (John 10:10) Paul is merely telling us how to enter into that abundant life in Christ.

These four Kings are conquerors. We cannot co-exist with sin any more than we can co-exist with malignant cancer. Sin will conquer us by sending King Death. But when by faith and grace we enter into abundant life in Christ, we will be conquerors over sin and abound in life. When Paul concludes this part of his argument in Chapter Eight, he declares that we can be super conquerors over sin and in life (8:37)

Four Laws

The metaphor of the four kings begins the argument of the second four chapters of this letter. These four kings prepare us to hear about four spiritual laws Paul profiles in the last two chapters of this second division of his letter (5-8). If we are going to learn to be a conqueror through Christ, we simply must learn these four spiritual laws.

The first law is “The Law of God.” (7:1-6) The Law of God is the Word of God (Psalm 1:1, 2). The Word of God is a great

miracle. Faith comes by hearing the Word of God, and God's Word is the incorruptible seed that generates spiritual life in us (Romans 10:17; I Peter 1:22, 23).

The Law of God will surface the second spiritual Law, which is "The Law of Sin and Death." This second spiritual law is that absolute, undeniable spiritual law that sin always has its consequences (7:7-25). According to James, the Word of God is alike a mirror (James 1:23). The function of a mirror is to show us the imperfections in our appearance so we can correct them before we go out and face the public. In the same way, the Word of God shows us the sin in our lives that we might conquer our sins before we interact with others. Even though it is not always a pleasant experience to look in a mirror, how many of us for that reason discard all the mirrors in our homes?

As with the four Kings, the first two spiritual laws declare the bad news, and the third and fourth spiritual laws announce the Good News. Paul calls his third spiritual law "The Law of the Spirit of Life in Christ." (8:1-4) He tells us the Good News that this law is able to free us from "The Law of Sin and Death."

Just as the law of aerodynamics overcomes the law of gravity and enables a large passenger jet airplane to lift off from a runway and fly, "The Law of the Spirit of Life in Christ" is the law of "spiritual aerodynamics" that makes it possible for us to be lifted up above "The Law of Sin and Death."

Since that is true, why is it that many of us spend so much

time spiritually as if we were commanding airplanes equipped with powerful engines, but we never take off and fly? Even though we have received the Holy Spirit, why do we not rise above and overcome "The Law of Sin and Death?"

The answer to that question introduces us to the fourth spiritual law, which is "The Law of the Spiritual Mindset." Paul writes: "Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh; those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace." (8:5-8) If we are not overcoming "The Law of Sin and death" in our lives, it is because we have "Set our minds on the things of the flesh."

One of the most profound teachings of Jesus could also be called "The Law of the Spiritual Mindset." Jesus taught that the difference between a life that is filled with happiness and a life that is filled with unhappiness is the way we see things (Matthew 6:22,23). Spiritual leaders, athletes, diplomats, and leaders in the business world place a high priority on the importance of having the right mindset.

Prayerfully consider these four spiritual laws. Then, ask yourself this question: What is the set of my mind today? "The Law of the Spiritual Mindset" can determine whether "The Law of the Spirit of Life in Christ," or "The Law of Sin and Death" rules your life.

Chapter Four

“All Things”

“Oh the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God. How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor? Or who has ever given anything to Him and it shall be repaid him? For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to Him be glory forever. Amen.” (11: 33-36)

This is the doxology with which Paul concludes the teaching section of this theological masterpiece. In this magnificent doxology, Paul declares that God is the Source of all things, the Power behind all things, and that His glory is the purpose for all things. He uses these two words “all things” together frequently, but never casually (Romans 8:28; II Corinthians 9:8). Precisely what things is Paul referring to when he puts those two words together in this doxology?

I have suggested that you divide the sixteen chapters of this letter into four divisions as you prayerfully discern the argument of this letter. Now I must ask you to forget about chapters and verses, as you try to understand the inspired argument of the Apostle Paul in this letter. Chapters and verses were not added to the Scriptures until the thirteenth century. Sometimes, chapter divisions can distract us from the inspired logic of a book of the Bible.

Paul begins building toward his use of those two words “all things” in this doxology when he finishes telling us about those four spiritual laws (8:13). He then gives an overview of how God brings us to salvation. His point is that God is the Prime Mover behind everything that happens to us in the process of being saved. He writes: “For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.” (8:29, 30)

This passage then builds to a tremendous doxology of its own. The apostle declares that God is in those who have received Him. He is with those who walk in obedience, and He is for those who are called according to His plan. When God is in us, with us, and for us, who can be against us, and what can possibly separate us from His love? He concludes this eighth chapter with a doxology that answers those questions.

Carry these inspired and inspiring thoughts with you into Chapter Nine where the apostle amplifies one word he used in the passage quoted above. That is the word, “predestined”. Paul’s amplification of this concept of what is also called “election” makes this one of the most difficult but devotionally rich chapters in the Bible.

His illustration of this concept is a pair of twins - Esau and Jacob - in their mother’s womb. Before either child had done

anything good or bad, God says, “Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated,” and “The older shall serve the younger.” (9:12, 13) God has a destiny, a plan for these twins before they are born.

One of my favorite scholars suggested that this teaching should be kept like a family secret among believers. We should not expect those who have not yet come to faith and received the Holy Spirit to understand and accept this teaching. It is even difficult for many believers because it makes God seem to be unfair, especially toward those who are not “chosen”.

Frequently, when believers first discover this teaching in the Scriptures their initial reaction is that this simply cannot be true. The apostle’s response to that thought is to challenge us to read the Old Testament. One of the shortest poems I have ever heard is: “How odd - of God - to choose - the Jews.”

There is a sense in which the entire Old Testament is an illustration of this teaching of election. From among all the nations of ancient history, God chose Israel. As I pointed out earlier, however, these three difficult chapters (9-11) also illustrate the opposite of election, because Israel has chosen - and still chooses today - not to be chosen.

God tells us through Isaiah that we should not try to understand His thoughts and His ways. He warns us that His way of thinking and acting is as different from ours as the heavens are high above the earth. (Isaiah 55:8,9)

As he presents this teaching, Paul challenges us with some great questions like: “Who are you, a man to ask God why He has created a Moses and a Pharaoh from the same lump of clay? Does clay tell the sculptor that is forming it into a vessel how it wants to be shaped?” (9: 20, 21) He also offers the explanation that election is not the primary issue. If we are chosen for salvation, the real issue is that we are saved by grace and not by any achievement that is the result of our own self-efforts (11).

The doxology with which I began this chapter and Paul concludes the doctrinal statement of this theological masterpiece is the only way we can respond to everything Paul has shared with us, including this teaching of election. Paul reminds us in this doxology that God did not need any of us to be His counselor when He decided how He was going to do all that Paul had in mind when he tells us that God is the Source of, the Power behind, and the purpose for all things.

Chapter Five

“So What?”

Now carry the truth of this doxology with you into Chapter Twelve. “When Paul uses the word ‘therefore’ we should always ask what the word is there for.” That wise counsel I received more than fifty years ago helps us to follow the logical argument of this apostle. This is also the way he frequently begins the application sections of his letters. As he begins to apply the truth he has shared with us in this letter, his use of this word is intended to direct us back to the very beginning of his argument (1:17).

“Therefore, with eyes wide open to the mercies of God, I beg you, my brothers, as an act of intelligent worship, to give Him your bodies, as a living sacrifice, consecrated to Him and acceptable by Him. Do not let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all His demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity.” (12:1, 2)

Many people believe that if they surrender themselves to God, the will of God will lead them to the worst place they can imagine. But Paul tells us that the will of God is good. In fact, it is perfect (2). How can you know the will of God for your life? Paul presents five steps to the will of God.

First, be centered upon God. Since God is the Source of everything, the Power behind everything, and the purpose for

everything, it is only reasonable to make God the center your life.

Second, be committed to God. We must make a commitment of our will to God’s will. Remember that guiding principle Jesus gave us when He said, “If any man wills to do God’s will, he will know.” (John 7:17) If God knows you are committed to Him and you will to do His will, He will show you His will for your life.

A third step is one in which we are passive. Paul tells us to be converted by God. “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” When you were born physically, it was a passive experience for you. This is also true when we are born again. God plays the active role and we are passive when we are our minds are renewed (II Corinthians 3:18; 5:17,18). When we have experienced “the renewing of our minds”, we can prove in experience that the plan of God for us is good, meets all His demands and moves us toward spiritual maturity.

Paul prescribes step four when He writes: “Be not conformed to this world.” (2) In other words, “Do not be like everyone else. Do not let the world around you squeeze you into its mold.” If you do, you will forfeit the will of God for your life. If you are conformed to Jesus Christ, that will make you a non-conformist to the world. Your values will not match the values of the secular people around you.

Finally, step five is to be confirmed in Christ. According to Paul, one way to do that is realize that the Holy Spirit works through His people by giving us spiritual gifts (3-8). These gifts confirm our life in Christ and equip us for our spiritual ministries. When we

discover which gifts God has invested in us, and surrender them to Him and exercise them for Him, those spiritual gifts will lead us into God's will and to the purpose in this life of our salvation (Ephesians 2:10).

Be Real!

As Paul continues his very practical application, he exhorts us to relate all the truth he has shared with us in this letter to the local assembly of which we are a part. My favorite translation of the New Testament repeatedly uses the word "real" throughout the application section of this letter. First, he writes: "Hate what is evil. Cling to what is good." (9) He is calling here for real purity and holiness among believers.

Paul also calls for real humility: "Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble." (16) Humility is a spiritual virtue that is always high on the agenda of the apostles. Then Paul calls for real unity. The unity Paul prescribes here is based on the fact that we are all one in Christ and members of His body.

When Paul writes, "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love," he means that we should have real love for one another. As he profiles the love he is prescribing here in his first letter to the Corinthians, he shows us what he means by real love (I Corinthians 13:4-7). This is an important truth that appears in the application section in all of Paul's letters.

Then Paul calls for real stewardship. "Share with God's people who are in need." (13) Paul lists hospitality as one of the spiritual gifts. In the original language, Paul is teaching here that we are not merely to be given to hospitality, but that we literally "persecute" people with love. Two places Paul consistently directs the use of what faithful stewards give to the churches are: the spread of the Gospel and the needs of believers.

Paul then calls for some real activity. Activity is no substitute for productivity. Paul writes: "Not slothful in business, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord." The word "business" here is actually "busyness". Paul is actually challenging us to have some real priorities. By being involved in too many things, any of us are guilty of being controlled by what has been described as "the tyranny of the urgent." We do not take the time to prayerfully focus our priorities.

The Apostle Paul was a man who knew what his priorities were. He could write: "This one thing I do." (Philippians 3:13) Observe how godly people we read about in the Bible join Paul in this spiritual discipline of focusing their priorities. David essentially wrote: "One thing have I desired of the Lord and I will seek after that one thing." (Psalm 27:4) The one thing David and Paul held in focus was their relationship with God and proving His will for them in daily experience. There is no greater example of priority focus in the Bible than the applied priorities of Jesus Christ.

Paul goes on to exhort those who believe the marvelous Gospel truth he has shared with us to have real motivation,

witnessing, prayer, and faith (14-21). Again, observe the emphasis on the everyday, real life application of the Gospel to our lives in the application chapters of this theological masterpiece we call “The Letter of Paul to the Romans.”

Believers As Citizens

In Chapter Thirteen, Paul shows us how to apply the Gospel of justification by faith as citizens. Although as we learned in the Book of Acts, there is a time for the believer to practice civil disobedience when the commands of civil government are in direct conflict with the teachings and commands of God. In this chapter Paul writes three times that the government official who enforces the law is “the minister of God.” (13:4,6). As the ordained minister of God, he is the present expression of God’s wrath (4).

Paul is not talking about born-again law enforcement officers, but about Roman soldiers. The word “ordained” actually means, “To be strategically placed.” Ordained ministers of the Gospel are strategically placed to preach the Law of God. Ordained peace officers are placed to enforce the law of God. Paul essentially writes, “If you want to get along with them, obey the law. But if you are stealing, or committing murder and they use the sword on you, as they use that sword they are the ministers of God.”

Since the concept that there should be law and order finds its origin in God, so the law enforcement officer finds the ultimate source of his authority in God. However, when a government is

corrupt and decadent and its laws are contrary to the Law of God, there is a time and place for civil disobedience (Acts 5:29).

Disputes of Disciples

In Chapter Fourteen, Paul directs his practical application to the disagreements among the disciples in Rome. Paul had not yet visited the disciples in Rome, but since all roads led to Rome when he wrote this letter, he knew many believers who had been there or would eventually travel to Rome. He knew there were disputes among the disciples there.

The very first Church Council was called to resolve this issue: Gentile disciples of Jesus did not want to live like Orthodox Jews, while born-again Jewish disciples wanted to continue to live like Orthodox Jews as they both followed a Jewish Messiah (Acts 15). The resolution of that Council was that Gentile disciples were not required to be Jewish, and Jewish disciples were permitted to retain their Jewish ways as they both followed Christ. Even though this issue was officially resolved, as these Jewish and Gentile disciples attempted to be one in Christ, they continued to have serious differences - especially regarding their diets and the celebration of Jewish Holy Days.

Some of the Jewish believers continued to celebrate the Sabbath (seventh) day as the day that was to be set apart to God for worship, rest, and renewal. To commemorate the resurrection of Jesus, the apostles, who were all Jewish, changed their day of

worship from the seventh day to the first day of the week. Born again Gentiles saw no reason at all to set aside the seventh day for their worship.

Paul told the Roman believers to resolve their disputes on this basis: “One person esteems one day above another; another man esteems every day. Let each man be fully persuaded in his own mind.” (14:5) He means that in addition to the Sabbath controversy, some believers considered the first day of the week to be “the Lord’s Day.” Other believers considered every day of the week to be the Lord’s Day.

What exactly does “fully persuaded” mean in addressing these disputes? First, Paul writes that we should be fully convinced on the basis of conscience. Someone has said, “Conscience is a calm small voice that makes us feel still smaller.” For the most part, conscience is a conditioned response from years of training by our parents and others.

It is important to observe that Paul does not prescribe conscience as a safe, totally reliable guide. But, he does advise us to listen to our conscience when it tells us that something we are doing is wrong. He affirms the resolution of that first Church Council that Jewish believers have a right and a responsibility to respect the diet and Holy Days of their religious tradition, and Gentile disciples must not be coerced to become Jewish in these matters.

Paul goes a step further when he writes that you should be fully persuaded in your own mind based on your own personal

conviction (6). Conviction is not a matter of what our parents have taught us. It is the result of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The Holy Spirit does not convict all believers in exactly the same way.

Paul goes on to say that we should also resolve these issues on the basis of consideration for the brother who differs from us (10-23). Even if our brother is not right, if he believes by conscience and conviction that something is wrong, we have a responsibility toward him.

He profiles this principle in greater depth to the Corinthians (I Corinthians 8-10). He writes to the Romans and the Corinthians that the issue here is not what is right or what is wrong, but how much we love our brother. We are not to cause our brother to stumble. We are to do everything we can to edify or build up our brother. Ultimately, Paul prescribes that we resolve these disputes on the basis of that love he profiles in his love chapter (I Corinthians 13).

The Missionary Heart of Paul

We really get to know the Apostle Paul in Chapter Fifteen. The world was on the heart of this apostle. In the Book of Acts we saw Paul with an obsession to get to Rome. Now, however, Paul writes to the Romans, “Whenever I journey to Spain, I shall come to you. For I hope to see you on my journey and to be helped on my way there by you.” (24) His vision now extends beyond Rome. He has an obsession to travel to Rome because he is counting on the

Roman believers to give him a support base so he can preach the Gospel in Spain!

The Personal Application

We cannot help but be challenged as we see the Apostle Paul apply to the whole world the Gospel he has explained so fully in this letter. As we conclude our survey of Paul's magnificent letter to the Romans, the obvious challenge is for you and me to first of all apply the truth of this letter personally. Do we have peace with God through our personal faith in what Jesus Christ did for us on His cross? Have we personally found our access by faith into the grace that makes it possible for us to stand for Christ in our world and live like a person who has been declared righteous by God - a life that glorifies God? Are we reigning in life by faith in our King Jesus? Are we setting our minds on "The Law of the Spirit of life in Christ" that is setting us free from "The Law of Sin and Death?"

Then, we must apply the truth of this letter to the brothers and sisters in our local church, to our citizenship and our relationship to our government. Finally, like this beloved apostle, we must apply the profound truth of this theological masterpiece to those in our world today who have never even heard this glorious Gospel. Like Paul we are debtors to all those around us and we should always be ready to preach and share the Good News of Christ without shame: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one who believes. (Romans 1:14-16)