

WHEN GOD ACTS!



*What happens when God
does His work, His way...*

by David Legge

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When God ACTS! - Chapter 1

"The Gift Of The Spirit Is Released"

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I believe the Lord has laid with me to share with you these nights from the book of Acts. So I want you to turn with me to the Acts Of The Apostles - and by the end of Friday night, you're going to know all of the book of Acts, and that'll be a miracle in itself! If you ever believed the day of miracles was over, you're going to see a wonderful miracle as I take you through the whole book this week! No, what I want to do is look at the themes, six themes that I feel are the major themes of the book of Acts. I've entitled this series "When God ACTS!" - what happens when God does His work, His way. We're going to look at various subjects, tonight we're going to look at the fact that when God does His work His way, 'The Gift Of The Holy Spirit Is Released'. Tomorrow evening we're going to look at how there will be 'Boldness In Witness', then we're going to see the next evening 'The Miraculous Is Displayed' when God does His work His way. Our fourth study will show that there will be 'Unity In The Body'; the fifth, there will be 'Missionary Expansion'; and the sixth, on Friday night God willing, 'Convention Is Challenged' when God does His work His way, "When God ACTS!".

Tonight we're looking at the gift of the Spirit being released, and so do turn with me to Acts chapter 1. Before we read, let us pray - and I want you to do something for me just now. I want you to pray for yourself, would you do that? Just for one moment, ask God that He will speak to you tonight, would you do that? Please do that, because I believe God answers that prayer, and He will meet you this evening. If you have an open heart, and you genuinely mean what you're about to pray, He will meet you and He will speak to you.

Let's pray together: Abba Father, we come to You in the mighty name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and we lift up His name in prayer just now as we have already been doing in song and in praise. We just ask, Lord, as we invoke His name that, by faith, we would invoke the very presence of the living Christ. We want to become present to Your presence, Lord. Thrice Holy God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit - may we know that You are here. We believe that You are here, but, Lord, we long for a manifestation of Your presence to our spirits, that indeed we might sense that God is among us. We believe that the early disciples had a certain sense that God had come, particularly at Pentecost - and Lord, we pray that we may know that You are with us, we pray that people for whom You are darkened and veiled and strangely distant, would tonight encounter a visitation of the Lord. We ask that all of us would know the Lord drawing strangely near, we ask that every single one of us will hear from heaven, and hear the voice of God to our souls. I take authority in the name of the Lord Jesus over every other presence that might be at work in this place, I bind you in Jesus' name. I pray, Father, in the mighty name of the Lord Jesus that You will release the power of Your word now by the Holy Spirit. Come Lord Jesus, come Holy Spirit, and reveal the Father to us. Amen.

Verse 1 of Acts 1, Luke, of course, writes, and he says: *"The former account I made, O*

Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach" - now, of course, what he's referring to there, Luke, is his gospel, the gospel of Luke. If you quickly turn to that, right back to the third gospel, you will see that he also addresses this book to Theophilus. In verse 1 of Luke 1 we read: 'Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed'. Now it appears that at one point the gospel of Luke and the Acts, as we have come to know it as 'The Acts of the Apostles' - I think, erroneously so - Luke and Acts were two volumes of one book addressed to this man Theophilus. If you have even a smattering of Greek, you might know that 'Theophilus' means 'lover of God'. So many believe that Theophilus is a symbolic name for lovers of God everywhere - now, certainly every God-lover will love the book of Acts, no doubt about that. Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones called Acts, 'That most lyrical of books', he said, 'Live in that book, I exhort you, it is a tonic, the greatest tonic I know of in the realm of the spirit' - and I think you're going to fall in love with the book of Acts this week, if you never have done before. But Theophilus is called in Luke, 'the most excellent Theophilus', and I think that indicates a title of officialdom - he was probably an official of some kind, and some think that since the Acts ends with Paul awaiting trial before Caesar, that Luke-Acts are a defence brief on Paul's behalf to give a Roman official the background on Paul's case. So Theophilus might well have been Paul's attorney, we don't know for sure, but it might fit into the whole scenario. So perhaps Luke wanted to show that Rome had nothing to fear from Christianity and from the apostle Paul.

Let me be a bit personal for a moment or two: for years I viewed Acts as merely a history of the primitive church. Luke, of course, is an excellent historian, there is no doubt about that - the historical accuracy of Acts is attested. As history, I found Acts incredibly exciting, it was inspiring, and even applicable to me as a Christian and to the church at large in a variety of ways - but I did believe that caution was necessary. You had to be careful with the book of Acts, and we must beware of expecting to see such phenomena in the church today that we see outlined in this book. Now I still have no doubt that there are some features in Acts probably unique to the original church, however I believe my previous approach was wrong - not least for the fact that there is nothing in the book of Acts, or indeed in the rest of the New Testament, to lead us to believe that we ought to expect anything other than the type of Christianity displayed in the book of Acts. I believe what we see in the church in Acts is normative Christianity - it certainly is not normal today, but it was when the church was born. Let me challenge you here tonight if your view of the book of Acts has previously been just as a history with some modern day application: why is it that we don't think that way related to the Gospels, even Luke's gospel. I mean it probably is one book Luke-Acts, so why do we not just look at Luke's gospel as mere history - no, when we read it and the other gospels, and preach the gospels, we believe that the Holy Spirit inspired these words not for an historic record alone, but to teach us spiritual truth for today, something that we need to know now. So for this reason I see Acts as a kind of theological narrative, that simply means an historically accurate account of events, but it's intended to teach us something, to teach us something we need to know as individual Christians, and something that the church needs to rediscover today more than ever.

So then, what does Acts teach us? Well, we see that Luke is being referred to here at the beginning, and Luke wrote the gospel of Luke to Theophilus, 'of all that Jesus began both to do and teach' - verse 1. What Jesus began to do and teach, the Acts of the Apostles tells us what Jesus continued to do and continued to teach through the Holy Spirit on the Earth via the church. Jesus is always the centre when God acts, Jesus is always the theme of God's actions - as Paul said in Romans 11:36: 'For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen'. The gospel of Luke is about all that Jesus began to do and teach, and the Acts of the Apostles tells us of that middle period, after the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ - look at verse 2, *"until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen, to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God. And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, 'which', He said, 'you have heard from Me'"*.

On the Earth He chose apostles, He suffered on the cross, He was buried, He rose again the third day, forty days later He ascended to heaven - but during that time when He was with the disciples in His resurrected body, He taught them things concerning the Kingdom of God, and then He sent the Holy Spirit - and that's what you're reading about in the Acts of the Apostles. What Jesus began to do and teach in Luke, He now continues to do and teach on the Earth through His church by the power of the Holy Spirit. I hinted at the beginning that I think the title 'Acts of the Apostles' is probably an erroneous title, because it's not about what the apostles did at all. Now we do read a lot about the apostle Peter, and the apostle Paul, but there is almost nothing about any of the other apostles - did you ever notice that in Acts? In fact, other characters like Stephen and Philip have a greater prominence in the book. Now why is that? Because this book is not a history of the apostles primarily, but it is an account of the acts of God's Spirit through ordinary everyday disciples like you and me - that's why it's so encouraging! What Jesus began to do and teach was not just to be continued on by the apostles and even the early church, but every disciple that would follow: God wants to act through you. When He does, He will work by His Spirit. When God acts, the gift of the Holy Spirit is released.

So I want you to see two things tonight, first of all: the promise that Jesus refers to; and then the Day of Pentecost that is the actual account of the outpouring of the Spirit. In chapter 1 we see here in verse 4: 'being assembled together with them, Jesus commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, 'which', He said, 'you have heard from Me'. The source of the promise is found here, it is 'the Promise of the Father', Jesus said, 'which you have heard from Me'. Now, when did they hear about this promise? Well, turn back with me to John 14 verse 16, Jesus says: 'And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper', or 'Comforter', or 'Encourager', 'Strengthener', 'that He may abide with you forever; the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you'. He promised the Holy Spirit, the Promise of the Father, to strengthen these weak believers, to encourage them, to comfort them and build them up. We see here that Jesus is saying, 'He will dwell with you and be in you', the Holy Spirit would be an indweller, to a large extent the ministry of Christ on the Earth was a local ministry, and was an external ministry; but the ministry of the Holy Spirit, He

would come, and He would be universal in His influence, and He would be internal in His impact. He would come to dwell within believers.

Look at verse 26 of John 14: 'But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you'. The Holy Spirit would be the Teacher of these believers in Christ, He would remind them of the things that Jesus first taught. This is the Promise of the Father that Jesus told them about. If you turn to chapter 16 of John, you see that He refers to further things concerning the Holy Spirit, verse 7 of John 16: 'Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away' - imagine that, telling the disciples who walked with Jesus that it was better that He went! 'It's to your advantage; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you. And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment'. He would reprove the world, He would convince the world of their sin and guilt before God, and the necessity of a Saviour in Jesus Christ.

Look at verse 13 of chapter 16, further promised: 'When He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come'. The Holy Spirit will guide, He will be a Revelator, He will reveal Christ. The job of the Holy Spirit would be to shine the spotlight on Jesus Christ. As someone put it, 'The purpose of the giving of the Holy Spirit was to glorify Jesus every day from the Ascension to the Second Coming'. The Holy Spirit would show Christ to us, that is revelation - but the Holy Spirit would also form Christ in us, that is confirmation: He would make us like Jesus.

The substance of this promise in verse 8 of Acts 1 is: 'But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth'. The substance of the promise was power to be witnesses to Jesus. Now let's pause for a moment: many people want the Holy Spirit, and they want more of the Holy Spirit, they maybe want to do miracles - but they don't want to witness for Jesus. Some people want the gift of tongues, but they don't want to use their natural tongue to tell of Jesus. Some want to witness in their Jerusalem, their hometown, or their comfort zone, but they don't want to go to their Samaria - that is, that place where they are prejudiced against and bigoted towards. You don't have to think too hard to apply that in Ulster. Maybe they don't want to go to the ends of the earth - let's face it, who would? It's very inconvenient. But, you see, this power is not just for our own tantalisation and thrill, the substance of this power was given in order that we would be witnesses to Jesus.

The signal of the fulfilment of the giving of this promise is found in verse 9 of Acts 1: 'Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight'. Now the Ascension, that's what that is, is significant on many levels - but related to the giving of the Holy Spirit, it is highly significant. Jesus said in John 7: 'He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water'. But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified' - but the time has now come! Jesus has been glorified here in chapter 1, He has now ascended to the glory beside His Father that He had with Him before the world began, and now we see Pentecost. The promise is

fulfilled, and the Spirit is outpoured.

Look at chapter 2 quickly, verse 1: 'When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language'. Down, please, to verse 12: 'So they were all amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'Whatever could this mean?'. Others mocking said, 'They are full of new wine'. But Peter, standing up with the eleven, raised his voice and said to them, 'Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and heed my words. For these are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 'And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams. And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; and they shall prophesy. I will show wonders in heaven above and signs in the earth beneath: Blood and fire and vapour of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD. And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved''.

Pentecost means 'fiftieth', and Pentecost was a feast of the Jews. It was called 'Pentecost', because it was held 50 days after the Feast of First Fruits. If you have time you could go home and read Leviticus 23, and the calendar of the Jewish feasts is like an outline of the work and life of Jesus Christ. Look at it: there is the Feast of Passover, and Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God slain before the foundation of the world, He is our Passover, Paul says in Corinthians. Then there is the Feast of First Fruits, which pictures the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, He is the first fruits of those who sleep, who have been raised in Him. But fifty days after First Fruits, fifty days after resurrection is the Feast of Pentecost, which pictures the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, and the formation of the church.

Now there is a sense in which we do not need another Pentecost, we don't need another Pentecost just like we don't need another Calvary, and we don't need another resurrection - but what is certain is that we need to personally, each of us, encounter Pentecost, just as we need our own experience of Calvary and the resurrection. So I want to ask you tonight, having looked at all this historic data, there is something that the Holy Spirit is teaching us, and that is that we need our personal Pentecost. I believe that Jesus died for all men, but does that mean that all men are saved because Jesus died for the world? Of course it doesn't, you must repent, and you must believe the Gospel: 'Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God'. Jesus Christ has risen from the dead, but does that mean that I am in touch with that same resurrection life that brought Him from the grave? Of course it doesn't, I have to enter in by faith into what Jesus did for me. Equally so, just because the Holy Spirit was outpoured at Pentecost, does that mean that I am living in the fullness and the power of the baptism of the Spirit? No it doesn't, otherwise Paul would never have said in Ephesians 5:18 to a group of Christians: 'Be continually being filled with the Holy

Spirit'. It's emphatic, it's a command, you've got to be filled with the Holy Spirit. So, are you?

In verse 16, Peter preaches, and he says 'This is that', Authorised Version says, I like that: 'This is that which was spoken of by the prophet Joel', that in the last days - and we are in the last days, the last days, I believe, is that period from the Ascension of our Lord Jesus right to His second coming - in the last days God's Spirit will be poured out on all flesh. In Acts chapter 2, we see it in Jerusalem and Judea. The Jews came from all over the Empire, but Jerusalem and Judea got hit by the power of Pentecost. But if you come with me to chapter 8, quickly, you see the Samaritans get an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Do you remember what Jesus said? 'When the Holy Spirit is come upon you, you will be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria'. Look at verse 14 of Acts 8: 'Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them, who, when they had come down, prayed for them' - now these are believers, they're already converted - 'he prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For as yet He had fallen upon none of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit'. The Samaritans are now getting impacted by the power of the Holy Spirit - it's necessary, it wasn't enough that they were converted and they were baptised in the name of Jesus, they needed the power of Pentecost.

But it didn't stop with the Samaritans. In chapter 10 we see the Gentiles get the Holy Spirit. What did Jesus promise? 'Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the world' - that's you and me, Gentile people. Look at verse 44, this is in Cornelius' house, and Peter has preached to them words whereby they may be saved, and in verse 44 we read: 'While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word. And those of the circumcision', that is, the Jews, 'who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God. Then Peter answered, 'Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?'. And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then they asked him to stay a few days'.

Do you see what's happening here? Jerusalem, Judea, the Samaritans, the Gentiles are not just repenting and believing and being baptised, but they are knowing the full immersion of the power of God that is necessary to live out this Christian life. You cannot live Christianity without the Holy Spirit, there is no such a thing! But there is another group in Acts, and they are an interesting crowd - you'd think that would be the end, you know, Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the world, but turn with me to chapter 19 for a moment. Now I know I'm covering a lot of ground here, but I think it's important. In Acts 19 we have a little group - a group of twelve, incidentally - Ephesian believers who are lagging behind somewhat in this whole power of Pentecost thing. Now look at verse 1 of chapter 19: 'It happened, while Apollos was at Corinth, that Paul, having passed through the upper regions, came to Ephesus. And finding some disciples he said to them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?'. So they said to him, 'We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit'. And he said to them, 'Into what then were you baptized?'. So they said, 'Into John's baptism'. Then Paul said, 'John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him', that's Jesus, 'who

would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus'. When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied. Now the men were about twelve in all'.

Now by the reply of these Ephesians in verse 2, 'We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit', well, it reveals that they don't have a complete knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, what He did on the cross for them, dying for their sins, the resurrection, and the power that is available for them. Now this is a bit of a controversial passage. Some people believe that these folk weren't saved. I believe they are, simply because they are called 'disciples' in verse 1, and in verse 4 it says that they had believed in Jesus, though it was through the preaching of John the Baptist they still had believed in the Christ. But it appears that they hadn't been baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus, Christian baptism, neither had they been baptised in the power of the Spirit. Now there is a tough question here, and I'm not entering into it tonight - were these people 'complete Christians'? We'll leave that one, but one thing is absolutely sure: Paul, when he met them, perceived that there was something lacking of the power and the gifts of the Holy Spirit in their life.

I want to ask you tonight, at the beginning of this series looking at how God acts, what happens when God does His work His way in our lives, in our churches, and in our community: is there something lacking in your life as a Christian? Dare I say it, and I've only met you folk, but I have to say it, I'm the preacher: is there something lacking in the life of this church in the life of the Spirit? Would someone look at your life or mine and see a conspicuous absence of the Holy Spirit, His peace, His power? Or what do you see when you look at your own life as a Christian? You were singing tonight, 'There must be more than this' - is that the way you feel? I tell you, I'm going around the province, and a little bit further afield now and again, not too far, certainly not the uttermost ends of the earth - but I'm meeting so many people, and they're saying: 'There must be more than this!'. Even in our province, that has a glut of excellent Bible expository preaching, there are Christians sitting in the pew who are starving of the actual word of God that has been spoken from the mouth of God. There is much of the letter that kills, but very little of the living word of God by which we are to live as Daily Bread.

'There must be more than this'. Maybe you have been a Christian years, and you're saying, 'There must be more'. C.H. Spurgeon, when he preached on Acts 19, said this: 'Have you then received the Spirit since you believed? Beloved, are you now receiving the Spirit? Are you living under His Divine influence? Are you filled with His power? Put the question personally', he said. 'I am afraid some professors will have to admit that they hardly know whether there be any Holy Ghost. And others will have to confess that though they have enjoyed a little of His saving work, yet they do not know much of His ennobling and sanctifying influence'. Spurgeon wasn't a charismatic, whatever that means anyway. You say, 'Well, I don't know really, I mean, I don't know, perhaps I am walking in the fullness of the Holy Spirit right now, perhaps I'm not. I'm just not sure, I don't really know'. Well, can I tell you: if you are walking in the fullness of the Holy Spirit, you will know it! Imagine someone saying: 'I don't know if I'm saved or not, I don't know if my sins are forgiven' - maybe that's where you are tonight. Listen, the Bible was written that you might know that you have eternal life. Just as it is not an arrogant thing to say, 'I know my sins are forgiven, I have peace with God, I am justified and I'm on my way to heaven', neither is it an arrogant thing to say, 'I know

that I have been filled with the Holy Spirit'. It's all of grace, and it's all through faith! It has been provided through the death, the resurrection, the ascension, and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ - and we receive it by simple faith - but you will know it! Spurgeon also said: 'Give a man an electric shock, and I warrant you he will know it; but if he has the Holy Ghost, he will know it much more'.

Others will know it to boot. I challenge you: you know a preacher who has the fullness of the Holy Spirit from a preacher who doesn't, you know it. You know a man or a woman who is filled with the Holy Spirit from someone who isn't. I don't like being too personal in messages, but I was thinking of a whole load of illustrations I could use to close this message tonight. I could use a story about D.L. Moody, or I could use a story about R.A. Torrey, or other great evangelists, great preachers who met God in a very special way after they were converted, and the change that it made in their lives - and I felt the Holy Spirit saying: 'What about your story?'. I don't want to tell that one! But for years - and I'll be giving my testimony later to the young people - for years I sought, by simple faith, and I believe that's the way you seek being filled with the Holy Spirit, by faith I sought God and asked Him upon Luke 11:13, 'If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!'. By faith, just in childlike faith the way I got saved, I took Him at His word and I asked Him to do it - but if you had asked me, right into ministry, if you had asked me: 'Are you absolutely sure, are you sure that you are filled with the Holy Spirit?', I would've said 'I believe it, I have taken by faith', but I lacked a subjective witness that the Comforter had come. I couldn't have really said, 'I know for sure'.

What about you tonight? Do you know? I have to finish the story: there did come a day. I don't know when I was actually filled, but I know when I got the witness that I had been filled - and I know, but I know that I know that I was filled. Now I leak, like you do and all of us do, that's why we need to be continually being filled with the Holy Spirit. Many Christians know nothing experimentally of the Holy Spirit, and Paul's question applies to you tonight, listen: did you receive the Holy Spirit in fullness when you believed?

The early church had none of the things that we think are so necessary for success. They didn't have seminary theological training, they didn't have beautiful buildings like this, they didn't have money, they didn't have political influence, legal clout, or social status, and yet the church won multitudes for Christ and saw many churches established in a godless Roman world - why? Because they had the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit. Vance Havner said: 'We are not going to move this world by criticism of it, nor conformity to it, but by the combustion within it of lives ignited by the Spirit of God'.

Well, are you saying tonight: 'There must be more than this'? When God acts, when God does His work His way, there is always a release of the Holy Spirit. I believe God wants to work in a big way this week and next, and if He is, He's going to release the Spirit in a way that you have not known before. Do you want that? Are you ready for that? Let us pray.

Now I want to challenge you as heads are bowed and as eyes are closed. Let me remind you that I asked you to pray at the start of my message that God would speak to you. Has He? Has He spoken to you? I believe there are people here tonight that

have been searching and seeking after the fullness of the Holy Spirit their whole Christian lives, and they have never entered into the confidence and the assurance that they have been filled. Is tonight your night? There is no equivocation. You know what we are about tonight, you know what we're saying. I'm trying to keep this as uncontroversial as possible - the bottom line is: whatever our interpretations of Scripture might be, or our terminology, we can't do anything without the Holy Spirit. The Christian life is the life of Christ, it cannot be lived in the flesh, it must be lived in the Spirit - and many are living their Christian profession out week by week in the power of the flesh, in a religious spirit, not the Holy Spirit.

Now while heads are bowed and eyes are closed - and I know it's the first night, but let's start as we mean to go on - we're dealing with God, we're not playing around here. This is serious stuff, and God is wanting to birth something, I believe, here. Is there anyone here tonight, just where they are, with their eye only upon God, will stand to their feet and say 'I want to be filled with the Holy Spirit'? Now before you do that, let me say this: you've got to be done with any known sin in your life, you've got to repent, and you've got to surrender - you can't be holding things from the Lord, if you want Him to fill all of your life, there can't be compartments of your life that you're in control of and not Him. So you've got to repent, you've got to surrender, and you've got to believe that this is for you - if you believe, you will receive the things that you have asked of Him. So you've got to believe that this is actually what you need and what God wants for you - and on those three things, will you stand to your feet tonight and say: 'I want to engage with God by faith, and I want to take it at His word'? That's the way to do it - as children we often ask the Lord Jesus into our heart every night of the week, don't we? Why do we do that? Because we have never taken it in the assurance of faith, we're not sure that the Lord has heard us. But there comes a time when we decide: 'Look, I believe His word, 'Him that comes to Me', Jesus said, 'I will never cast out'. Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved' - so we make the committal of faith, we commit it to the Lord, and we say 'I'm coming now once and for all, I'm believing You want to receive me, and I'm coming to You now Lord', and we commit it and we receive then. That's the assurance of faith. Will you, tonight, believe that the Lord wants to fill you? Maybe you were filled years ago, and you've grown cold? Will you repent tonight, will you believe, and will you commit it to the Lord, and receive and surrender? Stand to your feet just now, stand to your feet - heads bowed, please, and eyes closed - will anyone stand to their feet tonight, and say: 'There must be more, I know there is more'? Maybe you have been reading about this, maybe you have been praying about it - stand to your feet and say: 'Lord, tonight I want to be filled'. God bless you. God bless you.

I don't know what way you do things here, and I don't mean it in a rude way - I'm not really interested, in one sense, what's convention, I'm interested in you dealing with God. Jesus hanged stark naked on a cross for you, He wasn't ashamed for you, don't you be ashamed to stand to your feet for Him and ask Him to fill you. The early church were standing at Pentecost, they were standing in an open square, they were speaking in tongues, magnifying the mighty works of God - they weren't ashamed! We will see tomorrow night that this is what the Holy Spirit when God does His work His way, He gives us boldness. You have boldness tonight and say: 'Lord Jesus, fill me with Your Spirit'. Is there anyone else before we close this part of our meeting? God bless you. Jesus was filled without measure, and all of us continually need more measures - we're not like Jesus, we need more measures of the fullness of the Holy Spirit, and I need more.

Let me help these people standing before we sing our final hymn. Would you just pray with me if you need help - if you don't, pray your own prayer - but if you need help, just come to the Lord and say: 'O God, I come to You', just repeat it from your heart, even take it on your lips, it's important that you take it on your lips. The person beside you doesn't need to hear, but just you whisper it to the Lord: 'O God, I come to You in the name of Your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank You that on the cross He died for my sin. I ask You to cleanse me afresh, I repent of my sin, and I surrender all that I am to You - spirit, soul, and body; heart, mind, and will - all that I am and all that I have I surrender, Lord. I claim the promised Holy Ghost, the blessed power of Pentecost, to fill me to the uttermost - according to the promise of the Father and the Son, fill me now with the Holy Spirit, and give me the witness that You have come'. Now don't be looking for feelings, this is faith. Say to the Lord: 'I take it by faith, and thank You that You have heard me, and I believe that You have answered me' - you've got to take it by faith - 'I believe that You have answered me, give me the witness that You have come. Amen'. You may be seated.

Praise the Lord. There must be more than this, there is more than this! There is more! So much more! Oh Father, I pray tonight that these folk gathered in this meeting house will know the much more, 'how much more shall your Father in Heaven give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him'. May they know the 'much more', Lord. For Jesus' sake we pray - and may we all know it this week - for His glory alone, Amen.

When God ACTS! - Chapter 2

"**Boldness In Witness**"

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If you were here last evening you will know that I'm embarking on a study in the Acts, that's 'The Acts of the Apostles' - but we saw last night that really it's the acts of Jesus Christ through the instrumentality of the Holy Spirit via the Church. That sounds a bit complicated, but if you were here last night you will understand what I'm talking about. I've entitled this series "When God ACTS!", What happens when God does His work His way. Last evening we saw that when God does His work His way, there is a release of the Holy Spirit. Tomorrow evening, if you come along, you will see that when God does His work His way 'The Miraculous Is Displayed', that's tomorrow evening, and we'll be talking about the supernatural power of God. But tonight we're looking at how, when God does His work His way, there is a 'Boldness In Witness'. So we're turning to Acts chapter 2, and also chapter 3, and reading a number of verses from each of those passages.

Acts chapter 2, you remember last evening we touched on the fact that this is the Day of Pentecost, and the Holy Spirit was outpoured upon the church, particularly in Jerusalem and Judea, those Jews who had travelled in - from all over the Empire it has to be said - but were there for the feast. God met them, and the promise of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, was given to the church. We looked at the phenomena that took place on that day in relation to the outpouring of the Spirit, and we saw the beginning of the great Pentecostal sermon of the apostle Peter in about verse 14. We're going to take up his great discourse in verse 22, we're only going to read verses 22 to 24, but I want you to try and capture the scene and savour the atmosphere of this moment - all that has taken place with the outpouring of the Spirit, tongues of fire, and speaking in tongues, and magnifying the marvellous works of God, and how people were hearing in their own language - wonderful scene. Here Peter has told them: 'This is that which was spoken of by the prophet Joel that: 'In the last days, I will pour out My Spirit upon all flesh', says the Lord'.

Now he comes in verse 22, he addresses the people that are witnessing this great scene, and he says: *"Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know; Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it"*.

Then chapter 3 and we will take up the reading at verse 12. Just to fill in the gaps, a lame man has been miraculously healed - we'll maybe look a little bit at that tomorrow evening - through Peter and John's ministry. There is a great furore that takes place at what has happened, and we see Peter again addressing the bystanders, and I just want to take up his speech in verse 12 through to verse 15 of chapter 3: *"So when Peter saw it, he responded to the people: 'Men of Israel, why do you marvel at this? Or why look so intently at us, as though by our own power or godliness we had made this*

man walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His Servant Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let Him go. But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses". Amen, we will end our reading there.

We're going to pray, and as we did last evening - and we will do this every night - I want you to pray now for yourself, would you do that? It's good to pray for the preacher up here, and for everybody gathered, but I want you please to be a little bit selfish and I want you to pray for yourself. Have you come to hear from God? I believe we're going to hear from God, I believe we're going to meet with the Lord this week, and tonight - but it's important that you're in a disposition to receive, and that you have your ear, as it were, cupped to heaven to hear what the Lord has to say. So would you come, and would you ask Him now to speak to you?

Abba Father, we come to You again in the name that is above every name, Lord Jesus Christ. We reverence You, Lord, we declare that You are the Holy, Holy, Holy God of Heaven - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - who has revealed Yourself in the Person of the Word of the Living God, our Lord and Saviour. We thank You that, through the Holy Spirit, He now comes to us in all His power. We now invite You to come and take a dealing with us Lord, to come not only into this building, but, Lord, to come into our lives, to come to our minds and our hearts, our very spirits and souls; to bring the necessary conviction, to bring the strengthening, the encouraging, the quickening that we need. O come, Holy Spirit; come Lord Jesus Christ by Your Spirit; come Father. We claim that promise that Jesus said: 'If any man love Me and keep My word, My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him'. So come, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We do, in the name of the Lord Jesus, take authority over any ungodly spirits that would seek to act in our lives and even in this place tonight, and we bind them in Jesus' name, and ask now for a release of Your power through the word. In Jesus' name we ask these things, Amen.

What a change, particularly in the preacher here, Peter, Simon Peter! Peter, not many days ago, had denied the Lord Jesus with oaths and curses. In fact, he had run in terror from the inquisitiveness of a young girl. He had been sifted by Satan. Once he had been aggressively bold in his defence of the Lord Jesus Christ, and he asserted to Jesus Himself that he was prepared to go even to his death for Him - and yet now he has turned coward and compromiser. But such a change in a matter of days as we see him now, as this Pentecostal preacher in Acts chapters 2 and 3 - what has happened? Where has this new boldness come from? It's no longer a boldness in the flesh, but it's actually in the Spirit of God. Well, here's a lesson if ever there was one: this boldness has come from brokenness. Peter was broken before his own sinfulness and selfishness - and all of us, even as Christians, must come to that place where we see our sin the way it really is, and we see ourselves the way we really are. One of the greatest gifts that God can give anybody is to see themselves as He sees them, and then to see Him as He really is - that's the second thing.

Peter was broken in the face of his own betrayal and denial of our Lord. There is a sense in which he died to himself, he died to his own fleshly ambition - and, though he had good intentions and, as we would say, 'his heart was in the right place' when he put his foot in his mouth when he said these things that he was going to do for Jesus, it was of the flesh. So much of our Christian expression, I have to say to you tonight,

is in the flesh - it's in the energy of our humanity, rather than in the power and demonstration of the Holy Spirit. So Peter had to die to himself, even to the 'good' side of himself. You know that there is a 'good' side of our flesh, it's not just all dirty stuff and nasty things, there is a religious part of our flesh that likes to do 'good' things and takes great pride and gratification in being 'good'. But that's got to die, just like the 'bad' self has to die, the 'good' self has to die as well - because that which is of the flesh is flesh, and the flesh profits nothing. Paul says: 'In my flesh', and he knew what it was to be a really good fellow, he was blameless according to the law, he was a Pharisee of the Pharisees - that means you couldn't have pointed the finger at Paul and said: 'Oh, I saw him do this', or 'I heard him say that'. He kept the law, externally speaking, blamelessly - but in Romans chapter 7 he tells us that deep down in his heart he had a real problem with lust and covetousness. We've got to all come to that place, even as Christians, where we are broken: broken before the Lord and broken before ourselves.

Then that great day of Pentecost came in Peter's life, where this confessing sinner and failure and broken man came to the cross, was cleansed, surrendered himself, and was filled - dynamically - by the power of the Holy Spirit. Now Jesus told him of this turnaround, Jesus told him this was all going to happen - isn't the Lord Jesus wonderful? The way He had warned Peter - I mean, you might recall these verses in Luke 22:31-32: 'The Lord said, 'Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren' - how encouraging! I don't know what your circumstances are here tonight, but maybe you have found yourself where Peter was: in the sifting tray of Satan. Satan has got his clutches on you in recent times, and he has shaken you spiritually to your core - but how encouraging to see a man like Peter, to see that he wasn't a lost cause and neither are you! Praise God! I don't believe there's any person in this building tonight, or in Magherafelt for that matter, that is a lost cause.

I want you to see something quickly that I didn't see until recent years - John chapter 13 please, some words that the Lord spoke to Peter and to the disciples, but we are so familiar with John 14 that we've lost the context of it in the Scripture where it's found. You do know, I hope, that the chapter divisions and the verse divisions in our Bible, though they are very helpful and most of them are quite accurate, they are not there in the original. They are not there, they have been added in to help us find verses and so on. So scrub out in your mind for a moment the big '14' at the top of the chapter here, it's not really there. Look at verse 37: 'Peter said to Him, 'Lord, why can I not follow You now? I will lay down my life for Your sake'', and Jesus has to tell him something that's hard for him to take that's going to happen. 'Jesus answered him, 'Will you lay down your life for My sake? Most assuredly, I say to you, the rooster shall not crow till you have denied Me three times. Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you' - but do you see the flow here? There is no interruption. Now He is starting to speak to the other disciples as well, but He's also addressing Peter. He tells him: 'You're going to deny me, Peter. You're saying you're going to lay your life down for me, but you're going to deny me - but do not be troubled, believe in me'. You think: 'Well, that's not possible - how could Peter do what he did and still believe in the Lord?'. Well, the Lord Jesus told him in the verses from Luke that I quoted to you, 'I will pray for you. Satan is going to sift you but, Peter, I will pray for you that your faith does not fail'.

Isn't that encouraging? Jesus does not condemn you tonight. You might feel condemned. You may have been letting the enemy condemn you and sift you and accuse you. So many Christians that I know of are actually cooperating with the devil. The devil, of course, is known in the Bible as 'the accuser of the brethren'. He's wanting to sling dirt at us, and he's hoping it sticks. So often we agree with him, and we say: 'Oh yes, I am a terrible fellow, and, yes, I did do that. That makes me a miserable Christian, I agree with you'. Effectively what we do is, it's as if we're signing the dotted line on a contract for the enemy to keep battering us over the head with our old sins. We're cooperating with him, we're agreeing with him. Let me explain something to you tonight that is fundamental for you to enjoy the Christian life: there is a difference between condemnation and conviction. When you sin, you ought to feel it, and the Holy Spirit will convict you. But 1 John 1 tells us that if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. So if you come and genuinely repent and confess your sin, and you continue to feel miserable because of it, it's not God's conviction it's the devil's condemnation. Some of you are here tonight and, a bit like Peter, you've gone into the depths of despair. You maybe feel that God has given up on you, and there is no hope for you, and you're a lost cause - I want you to hear the words of the Lord tonight: 'Let not your heart be troubled; believe in Me, believe in Me. I will forgive you, I will cleanse you!'. Maybe He already has, but you're wallowing in your own guilt and shame.

Now let me illustrate how this change and transformation happened in Peter's life. If you look at chapter 3 where we read together the little excerpt from the sermon, look at verses 13 and 14, Peter says: 'The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His Servant Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied' - that's an interesting word, isn't it? 'Denied', who is speaking here? Just remind me? Peter! '...and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let Him go', verse 14, 'But you denied' - this is still Peter speaking here? Yes! - 'the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you'. Maybe I'm just cynical, but I might be thinking: 'Well, that's rich coming from you, Peter!'. 'You're accusing us of denying Christ in the presence of Pilate, denying the Holy and Just One - did you not deny Jesus Christ a few days ago, Peter? You've got a very short memory!'. Yes, but you see that is not who Peter is any longer. I want you to grasp this tonight, let me help you, let me ask you a question: do you derive your identity from your failures, your mistakes, your sins, or your shortcomings as a Christian; or do you derive your identity from who you are in Jesus Christ? Romans 8 verse 1 says: 'There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus' - and yet so many of us are living constantly under condemnation! Now I know you might be struggling with sin, and I'm not excusing that - you do need to repent, you do need to confess - but I'll tell you this: you'll never get out of that slough, that quagmire of sin when you're agreeing with the devil that you're a no-good scoundrel - you'll never get out of it! You've got to take your place in Christ, and allow yourself to be lifted into heavenly places with Jesus Christ, and then you will tap into the power of Pentecost in His fullness to overcome.

Where did Peter's boldness come from? He was a denier, and then he is able to stand up in front of all these Jews - he ran away from a wee lassie, and now he's standing in front of all these people, and he's declaring boldly without fear that they denied the Holy and the Just One. Is this hypocrisy? No, it's not. This boldness was not coming from Peter, it was coming from the Holy Spirit. You might be sitting here tonight thinking: 'How could I ever tell people about Jesus after the mistakes I've made? Like,

they're not private things, everybody knows about them!'. Well, you look at Peter tonight - not only was he transformed, but the whole motley crew of the disciples were changed completely. One moment they were cowering in fear in a locked Upper Room, and the next they are fearlessly declaring the word of God with power, turning the known world upside down. What is the explanation for this? Turn back to chapter 1 where we were last night, verse 8, what was the promise? Jesus said: 'You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth'. What would they become? Witnesses! Bold witnesses of the Gospel!

There's a great debate that goes on, and I'm not going to enter into it, about what the signs are of being filled, or some would call it baptised, in the Holy Spirit. As I said, I'll not step onto that one tonight - but there is a sign that is often overlooked, and it's here in verse 8 of chapter 1: you will be witnesses. I know of a man, and he is what you might call 'charismatic' with a small 'c'. He went on one occasion to a house where there were Christians meeting for prayer, and he was prayed for to be filled with the Holy Spirit. He just took it by faith, as I said to you last evening, just upon the promise of Luke 11:13, he took God at His word that this was something God wanted for him - Christ died for and rose again for - and he just took it on God's word by faith, and he thanked God for it, and went away. He didn't have flashing lights, he wasn't struck with lightning, the hairs didn't go up on the back of his neck - and so often that's what people are looking for - but he was on the bus on the way home, this was in Hong Kong, he was on the bus on the way home and he had this real urge to witness to the man sitting beside him on the bus. That was very strange for him, because that was a problem for him up until then - he really didn't feel a drive to tell people about Jesus. Now incidentally, he didn't tell the chap about the Lord, but he took it as a witness that he had received the filling of the Holy Spirit by that desire. I want to ask you tonight: do you have a desire - I'm not saying you find it easy, I don't find it easy to witness to people on the bus, or at the shopping counter, or in the petrol garage, I don't feel it easy talking to my neighbours, especially my family, about the Lord - it's not easy, but do you have a desire? When the Holy Spirit takes possession of you in totality, you will have that. There will be a boldness.

It is seen here in Acts in two ways. What happens when God does His work His way is that there is a boldness in witness, and the witness is effective. Now I want you to see tonight the effectiveness of the witness of the early disciples, but I also want to caution you - the second point I want to bring to you is the opposition of their witness. First let's look at the effectiveness of their witness, look at chapter 2, again this great sermon on the Day of Pentecost. Look at verse 37, we haven't got time to look at it all, but look at the reaction to the apostle Peter: 'Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Men and brethren, what shall we do?' - that's what every Gospel preacher is looking for. I know that there will be people in the meeting tonight - wouldn't it be wonderful if you were even to cry out and say: 'What do I need to do to get right with God?'. It's a long time from we've seen that in gatherings, isn't it? It does happen every now and again, I have been interrupted - people putting their hand up and asking a question. I remember a fellow asking the question from the congregation: 'Why did Jesus die?' - that was great! There were some sour faces who were all annoyed at the interruption - I was glad! God was speaking to that man, he was cut to the heart. God was speaking! It wasn't like preaching to tailored dummies, as it often is when we are in church. This man had a heart, and God had spoken to his heart - he wasn't afraid to cry out. You see, if you

know conviction, and you're taking eternal things as reality, you will shout out! You won't care what the crowd think!

These folk, Peter's preaching is so effective that they are cut to the heart - and they cried out: 'What shall we do?'. This was in response to the preaching of the Gospel. Now in the New Testament, and in Acts, there is the phenomenon of 'gossiping the Gospel', and I think that's something we all need to do. All of us are to be preachers of the Gospel - that's what the early Christians did, whether it was the marketplace, the workplace, or in the home: they told people about the Lord Jesus and His love. But there is what we call 'the apostolic kerygma', and 'kerygma' is a Greek word for 'the heralding forth, the proclamation and declaration of the good news of the evangel' - that's where we get 'evangelistic' from, and 'evangelical' from - the proclaiming of the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ publicly, the message of God. That is what the New Testament says God has blessed to the saving of souls. In 1 Corinthians 1 verse 21, Paul says: 'For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe'. God has ordained this kerygma, this evangel, this foolish message of a Man who died on a cross in ignominy and blood, and rose again victoriously the third day - He has ordained that message to save souls from hell, and it's about time the church stopped diluting it! Amen? And stopped replacing it with rubbish! Preaching has been replaced today by so-called 'evangelistic skits', 'tricks', there are evangelistic illusionists, and contortionists, and ventriloquists, and dramatists, and every 'ist' you can think of, replacing the preaching of the Gospel in power. It really betrays a lack of faith in the power of the message of the cross.

Now, having said that, it's no surprise to me that some have resorted to such substitutes when you consider the impotence that there is in modern day pulpits. A lot of the preaching is atrocious, and even that which is truthful in its content is the letter of the law without the power of the Spirit. You thank God that you've got a man in this pulpit [Rev. Currie] that preaches the Gospel, I thank God for you. We need more men who will be fearless in their proclamation of the Gospel, because that's what cuts people to the quick - that's the message that God has ordained to bring conviction. On the Day of Pentecost, there were 3000 who were converted, baptised, and added to the church - from one sermon on the Day of Pentecost 3000 souls were saved, and we're preaching thousands of sermons and seeing hardly one saved! E.M. Bounds said: 'No erudition, no purity of diction, no wealth of mental outlook, no flowers of elegance, no grace of person can atone for lack of fire'. We need the fire of the Holy Spirit again in our preaching. You see there is a myth, particularly in evangelical conservatism, that all you need is the word of God, and all you need is to expositively preach the Scriptures - that is not enough! Ulster is sinking because of the preaching of the Scriptures without the power of God. In 1 Corinthians 4:20, Paul said: 'For the kingdom of God is not in word but in power'. In 1 Thessalonians 1:5, Paul said to the Thessalonians: 'For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance'. You can quote me on this: the word of God is not enough, if all that the word of God is are black and white words on a page - but it is the word of God, spoken from the mouth of God, preached in the power and demonstration of the Holy Spirit that makes the difference.

Ad nauseam I've heard this verse in Isaiah 55 quoted in a prayer meeting: 'My word shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish that for which I have sent it' - that's not what the verse says! I'm going to get one of you to quote it, will I? 'My word which

proceeds out of My mouth; shall not return unto Me void'. What did Jesus say? 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word in the Bible' - is that what He said? 'Every word that proceeds from the mouth of God', what is that? That is the prophetic rhema word of God that God is speaking at a particular time in human history, for a particular people, in a particular situation - and you don't get that from '101 Sermons For Every Occasion In The Year', you get that from the heart of God, when your ear is toward God, when you're walking with God, when you're listening to God - and that is what the church is dying for!

When God does His work in His way, there will be an effectiveness in the preaching of the Gospel, cutting to the heart. G.H. Lang, I'm sure you've never heard of him, but he was one of the early brethren, and he wrote a little book called 'God at Work in His Own Lines' - not a million miles away from our title for this series. He tells a story in that book of an illiterate draper in Cornwall called Mr Gribble. Mr Gribble invited people into his home, and he used to read a penny sermon to them. You can imagine what that was like, the man was illiterate - but he was trying his best to learn to read. Through reading these penny sermons - you know what that is, a sermon on a little tract for a penny - there were people saved. After a while he got the confidence, and he was able to say a few words of his own free will without the penny sermons - and then there were hundreds of people saved. J.N. Darby - you might have heard of him, the founder of really the Plymouth Brethren that we know today - wrote to another of the early brethren, by the name of S.T. Tragilles in a letter. This is what he said, I'm quoting: 'There are few men who can preach the gospel more fluently than you and I can, and we see few souls saved, and they tell me there is an illiterate brother called Gribble, and when he quotes scripture there are people swept into the kingdom'. G.H. Lang in his book says: 'Mr Darby's question is well worth pondering' - is it not? Why? Obviously the power of the Holy Spirit rested on Mr Gribble in a way that it didn't on others.

Henry Ward Beecher, the great preacher, said: 'I should as soon attempt to raise flowers if there were no atmosphere, or produce fruits if there were neither light nor heat, as to regenerate men if I did not believe there was a Holy Ghost'. But we saw last evening that the book of Acts is not a history book alone, it is teaching us the way things should be today - and the way things should be today is: we should have powerful, dynamic preaching in the demonstration of the Holy Spirit - and people ought to be convicted and cut to the quick. Don't lose faith in Gospel preaching, don't replace it with rubbish!

The second thing that we see in Acts is opposition to the witness. You see effectiveness in preaching does not always mean conversion. Turn with me to Acts 7, this is a very similar verse to the one we read in Acts 2:37, where people were cut to the quick and cried out, 'What shall we do?' - but the result was different here in Acts 7:54. Stephen is now the preacher, it's one of the greatest sermons in the whole of the Bible. He goes through Jewish history before these Jews and shows them how they resisted the Holy Spirit in their history, and in verse 57 at the conclusion the people responded thus - verse 54: 'When they heard these things they were cut to the heart'. Now, if you stopped there, you'd think it was just the same as the folk on the Day of Pentecost - but read on: 'And they gnashed at him with their teeth'. The result is, as you read on, that they end up stoning Stephen to death, and he becomes, effectively, the first Christian martyr. You see, when the Gospel is preached in power and boldness, its effectiveness doesn't always result in conversion, it can result in persecution and

opposition. As you read the book of Acts, as I've been encouraging you to do, you will see in Acts chapter 4 that Peter and John are arrested because of the healing of the lame man. We see in chapter 5 that the apostles were jailed. In chapter 7, where we are now, Stephen is martyred, stoned to death. In chapter 8, look at chapter 8 verse 1, 'Saul' - that's Paul before he was converted - 'was consenting to Stephen's death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles'. Look at verse 4 of chapter 8: 'Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the Gospel'.

Now we want effectiveness today, don't we, in our evangelism? But I have a hunch that we want the effectiveness without the opposition - but the truth is the two tend to come together. Both physical force against the extension of God's kingdom, and - it has to be said - something that most of the church is completely ignorant to is spiritual opposition to the extension of Christ's kingdom. We see that in the book of Acts. In Acts 13 we see a sorcerer by the name of Elymas who came against the preaching of the Gospel. In Acts 16 we see a possessed slave girl with a spirit of divination who followed the apostle everywhere he went, bringing a bad reputation to the preaching of the Gospel by what she was saying. You see, we've got to understand that we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, against spiritual rulers in heavenly places. Therefore the weapons of our warfare are not carnal or fleshly, but are spiritual and mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds - but there is a spiritual war on!

Incidentally the word 'martyr' comes from the Greek word for 'witness', which means that to witness for Christ involves bloodshed. Even if we do not resist unto blood, striving against sin, as Hebrews says, there ought to be some form of suffering that we endure for a bold witness to Jesus Christ even in our modern age. Now there is great mystery in suffering, I'll grant you that - all suffering, but here the suffering is related to Gospel preaching. Not all suffer in the same way, and we see that in Acts. Look with me at chapter 12: 'Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword. And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during the Days of Unleavened Bread. So when he had arrested him', that's Peter, 'he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover'. James lost his life, Herod had him beheaded, and Peter is thrown into prison - but Peter ends up getting out of prison in a miraculous way, angels set him free. I've often thought: 'How would Mrs James have felt about all that?' - I'm being serious! Her husband loses his head, and Peter gets out of prison at the behest of angelic hosts. It's hard to understand, isn't it?

What we do see is that there is great suffering for standing for Christ, and speaking boldly costs us. It causes division, you can see that in chapter 14 and right throughout Acts, but it even causes riots. In chapter 19 you've got this city of Ephesus, and because they are preaching and people turn away from the goddess Diana out of whose worship the silversmiths were making a living making these little idols, and so they caused a whole riot in the city of Ephesus. Now let's just pause for a second: this is historic, original Christianity. This is what happens when God works His way, when God acts - I believe this is normative Christianity. Where are we today? When did we get so sophisticated, so self-protective and comfortable? I mean look at the apostle Paul, how much he suffered for His name's sake. We see that the latter stages of this

book that he appears before all these Roman governors - Felix in chapter 24, Festus in chapter 25, Agrippa the King in chapter 26. Quickly turn with me to 2 Corinthians 11, and we get a list of Paul's sufferings biographically, verse 24, he says: 'From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one' - at forty stripes you usually died, he got five times thirty-nine stripes. Verse 25: 'Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness; besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches'.

Back to Acts, go to Acts chapter 20 and verse 24, he's leaving the church at Ephesus and the elders, he's meeting them for the last time, and in verse 24 Paul says in Acts 20: 'None of these things move me' - what things? That list! All the things he suffered for Christ and the Gospel, he says: 'None of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God'. What? Look at chapter 21, they beg him not to go to Jerusalem, they tell him: 'You're going to die if you go there'. In verse 13 Paul answered: 'What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus'. How Paul suffered for the Gospel!

Do you know what it says in 2 Timothy 2:8-9? You can turn, if you want, to it - 2 Timothy 2:8-9 - Paul says there: 'Remember that Jesus Christ, of the seed of David, was raised from the dead according to my gospel' - he called it 'his gospel', because he was so associated with the death and resurrection of Jesus in his suffering, I believe, that he could call it 'my gospel'. Look at verse 9: 'For which I suffer trouble as an evildoer, even to the point of chains; but the word of God is not chained'. Paul says: 'This Gospel has not given me a life of glamour and ease' - so that's how we can chuck all that prosperity gospel stuff in the bin. Now I'm not saying that God doesn't bless you, He does and He can bless by providing our needs financially, over and above what we need at times - but this prosperity gospel does not measure up to the word of God. You know what I'm talking about, on cable television and satellite TV, that 'God wants you to be a millionaire - just give all your money to me'. You know the preachers that say all that: 'God will heal you, just give me your money!'. That's not the way Paul lived, that wasn't his experience: he suffered trouble as an evildoer, 2 Timothy 2 verse 9. Do you know that that's the way the world is starting to see us now? That's right! Even in Ireland we are being seen as evildoers, we are wrong, we are intolerant, we are irritants in society - and even the religious world rejects those who speak out boldly for the Gospel.

Jesus warned us of this - why are we so surprised? John 16:2, He said: 'They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service'. Can I tell you: this is what Jesus meant when He said, 'Carry your cross' - that's what it means! People think it's an infirmity or an illness, 'That's my cross!'. Or general difficulties in life, or a nagging husband, or a difficult wife, they are your cross to bear - but it's not, none of those things are 'bearing your cross'. Bearing your cross is suffering for the name of Christ. Neither is it being offensive in Christ's name. Some people in our own land, they force-feed people the Gospel, and they are generally obnoxious - and they've got this persecution complex

because they think the whole world is against them, when actually it's just downright bad manners. I'm not talking about that, we're talking about the offence of Christ, His Gospel, His cross, His claims - that is what it is to carry your cross: to voluntarily take up the cross of Jesus and suffer for Him.

I could talk to you tonight about Egypt, Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan, and other countries where our brothers and sisters are suffering - and I hope you're praying for them - but I want to ask you tonight: how are you suffering for the Gospel? I ask myself that. But you might say: 'But we live in a Western civilised, liberal democracy - how could we be persecuted for the Gospel?'. Jesus said: 'In the world you will have tribulation'. In John 15 verse 20 He said: 'Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master'. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you'. In 2 Timothy 3, where we were, verse 12, Paul says: 'Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution'. If we are not suffering, we need to ask the question: why? Surely it is that our lives do not sufficiently collide with and challenge the norms of our society the way these early disciples did. Surely it is the case that we have adapted to the world around us, we have allowed the world to push us into its mould. Instead of being a thermostat that regulates our environments, we have become a thermometer that merely reflects the temperature of the age. Is it not the case that we are not distinct enough, we are not different enough, we are not distinguished enough - do you know what the word for that is in the Bible? 'Holy' - that's what 'holy' means: different, unique. I don't mean in an idiosyncratic way, or peculiar oddities, or religious traditions - I'm talking about being different and standing out as a light on a hill, as salt that has not lost its savour, and where others can see Christ's life emanating from us in our characters.

I believe, and many others do too, that there is a sifting coming to our nation. Though it has been possible to coast along comfortably as a Christian in the United Kingdom and Ireland, those days, I believe, are coming quickly to a close. Our faith is significantly colliding with the accepted norms of society. Now, they always have done, but I believe they are today in a more blatant, aggressive way than in the past - and this sifting is going to sort out those who are prepared to suffer, and those who just have a profession of convenience. In what areas will there be this sifting? It's obvious: sexuality; marriage, what it means; abortion; freedom of religious expression; euthanasia; genetic engineering; ethics in the workplace. 'These have all been here for a while', you'll say - but I ask you: how long until those who conscientiously object to the accepted wisdom on these matters are persecuted for it? How long until you lose your job? How long until you are suspended? How long until you are prosecuted for discrimination? If there is not a gracious divine intervention it will come, I believe - if it has not come already!

Well, the good news is: the word of God is not bound - but it's at a cost. Persecution comes. I mean, why should we be any different? Why should we be any different than the Lord Jesus Christ, our Master, and the early apostles? James, the brother of John, was slain by King Herod by the sword. Tradition tells us that most, if not, some believe, all of the apostles died a martyr's death. Tradition tells us Philip was crucified at Hierapolis in Phrygia; Andrew was crucified in Odessa; Simon the Zealot was crucified; Thaddeus was crucified; Bartholomew was beaten and crucified in India; Peter, who we have been talking about tonight, was crucified in Rome upside down, his head down - tradition tells us he deemed it unworthy to die in the same manner as his Lord, so he requested to be crucified upside down. James the Less was clubbed to

death in Jerusalem; Thomas was thrust through by a spear in India; Matthew was beheaded in Ethiopia; and Paul the apostle was beheaded in Rome - and I want an easy life? I think it's my right in Christ to have comfort and ease?

I have a book on the shelf, I pulled it down today, it's called 'By Their Blood: Christian Martyrs of the 20th Century'. The little blurb on the back says: 'More Christians have been martyred in our century', that was the 20th century when it was written, 'than during all other eras of the church history combined' - more Christians martyred last century than all other centuries of the church combined! Now I ask you: what is abnormal? All these countries where there is persecution, are they abnormal? Is the apostolic age abnormal? Or are we abnormal? In January 1956 five young American missionaries were killed by Auca Indians in South America, trying to reach them with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. One of them was Jim Elliot, who said: 'He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose'. How is your witness for Jesus? Are you endued with power from on high to boldly proclaim, in love, in grace, but in truth, and take your stand when the persecution comes? I believe it's coming - will you take your stand? If you're going to take your stand then, you'll find it easy to take your stand now.

Let us pray. Let's just take a moment in the quietness, before the meeting closes with a hymn and a prayer. We don't want to rush. Can I just make a request of you - I know I'm the new kid on the block, but I would just ask you that you reverence the presence of God in, if you want to call this space the sanctuary, or whatever you want to call it, this part of the building. God is dealing with people here. There is a cup of tea very kindly provided out in the foyer, but I would ask you to talk out there and fellowship out there, but here just allow the stillness in the presence of God to remain if you can, because people are dealing with God - God is speaking to folk deep in their hearts. Has God spoken to you tonight, has He? Are you like a Peter who came into this meeting far away from God, and you thought you were a lost cause, no hope for you? You might call yourself a backslider, and you think you've burned your bridges and there is no way back - but God has spoken to you tonight. Is there anyone here right now who will say tonight: 'I'm going to hear what Jesus said to Peter, and I hear Him saying it to me: 'Don't worry, I'll pray for you, believe in Me''? Is there anyone who's going to come to Christ tonight on those grounds? Just raise your hand, every head is bowed and eye closed, we just want to pray for you tonight and help you in the presence of God - is there anyone here tonight? Raising your hand doesn't make you a Christian, or bring you back to the Lord, but it's just a confession. Don't be ashamed any longer, don't be ashamed of Jesus who was not ashamed of you. Jesus says: 'If you are ashamed of Me, I will be ashamed of you, I will not confess you to My Father in Heaven - but if you confess Me, I'll confess you' - that's what Jesus said in Matthew 10.

Is there anyone here tonight that will say: 'Tonight I'm being done with my worldliness and my backslidden life, and I'm going to come back to the Lord tonight'? Just raise your hand where you are, I will see it, and we will pray for you now and pray with you - is there anyone, quickly? I'll not prolong it, is there anyone? I believe there is a battle going on here, I can see that - is there anyone? Let me help those who maybe haven't had the courage, just pray with me this prayer: 'O God, I come to You in the name of Your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ'. If you're becoming a Christian tonight, just pray this: 'I confess my sin', if you're a backslider, confess your sin and your waywardness, 'I repent of my sin, I thank You that Jesus died for me on the cross, and I receive Him as

my Saviour by faith. I ask You to save me now, cleanse me, and make me Your child. I renounce Satan and all his works. Fill me now with the Holy Spirit as I surrender to Jesus as Lord'. If you're a backslider pray something similar to that, and the Lord will hear you - confess your sins, He is faithful. All Christians tonight, all Christians here this evening, including the preacher up here, we all need to rededicate ourselves - especially in the face of coming persecution, if the Lord does not intervene - we all need to decide now: 'I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back. The world behind me, the cross before me, though none go with me, still I will follow; no turning back, whatever the cost'. In your own heart, deal with God tonight - will you take up your cross afresh this evening and follow Him, whatever it means? You can suffer in the church, by the way, as well as out of it - the enemy has got a great knack of using professing Christians to persecute us, but you must pay the price.

Father, we pray that there will be rejoicing in heaven tonight over repentance - not just in people who have never been born again, but even in Your own people coming home. Lord, ultimately, we'll never be home until we are in glory. Lord, help us not to make our home here and be comfortable here, but, Lord, help us, O God, to take our stand, whatever it means, that it might make a difference to our families, to our friends, and our community. Lord, we want to see You act, we want to see You do Your work Your way - so release Your Spirit, and make us bold witnesses to Jesus, in whose name we pray, Amen.

When God ACTS! - Chapter 3

"The Miraculous Is Displayed"

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It's a great privilege for me to be studying the book of Acts with you these nights, and I do trust that we're knowing the Lord's voice as we look at it together. We're turning tonight to Acts chapter 4. If this is your first night, let me just fill you in a little on what we've been doing. We've been doing a little study, thematically, of the book of Acts - and we've entitled it "When God ACTS!", what happens when God does His work His way. On Sunday evening we looked at how, when God does His work His way, 'The Gift of the Holy Spirit Is Released'. We saw that that is running right throughout the Acts, where the Holy Spirit is being poured out on all flesh. Then last evening we saw that when God does His work His way, there will be 'Boldness in Witness'. The Holy Spirit was given, and the primary reason that He was given was that we should be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the world. We saw how that happened in the lives of the early disciples, and how we need to be bold witnesses for the Saviour. Tomorrow evening, if you're with us, it would be a good one to get along to, is that when God does His work His way 'Unity Is in the Body'. We're going to see tomorrow evening how the body of Christ is one, and how that actually works out in our everyday expression of Christianity in the 21st-century - at least how it ought to.

Tonight we're looking at how, when God does His work His way, 'The Miraculous Is Displayed' - you just cannot read the Acts without seeing the supernatural. But this is something, as we saw in our introduction, that is not just an historic account of the way God used to be and the way He used to behave, but He is the same today - He is the unchanging God, 'I am the Lord who changes not' - and Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and forever. There is something for us to learn from the miraculous. So we're turning to Acts chapter 4, and we're not going to read too much just at the moment, but Peter and John have been arrested, and there has been the miraculous displayed: there has been the healing of a lame man. A lot of the discourse that happens is in reaction to that, and how the Jews are really appalled by what has been happening, because it has been done in the name of Jesus of Nazareth who they regard as an impostor and a false, counterfeit Messiah.

We're just taking up where there has been a lot of threats made against the early disciples and the apostles, and they take it to God in prayer - what a lesson there is there right away. Whenever you have opposition in the work of God, take it to God in prayer. What we see happening in our land is atrocious, and an indictment against the name of Christ, where people are taking their animosities against one another to the press, some are taking it to the law - we are meant to be taking it to God in prayer, and taking it to one another in love. They took this opposition to the Gospel to God in prayer. Look at verse 29 of chapter 4, wonderful prayer - oh that we could pray it tonight - the apostles pray: *"Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word"*, there's the boldness in witness we thought about last night, this is what they're asking God to do, *"by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the*

name of Your holy Servant Jesus'. And when they had prayed", imagine this, "the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness".

Let us pray, and as we pray let me invite you again to pray for yourself that God might speak to you tonight - will you do that? Do you want to meet this supernatural God? Have you a need of a miracle in your own life? We all certainly need to encounter the Living Lord Jesus, and certainly the church of Jesus Christ, and this church, needs to rediscover His power - we all do. So let's pray and ask the Lord to meet with us: Abba Father, we come to You again in the lovely glorious name of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the only name that we kneel under tonight, the Captain of our salvation, the one and only Head of the church. We meet as members of His body in the temple of the Holy Spirit, living stones fitted together by Your sovereign power. We thank You, Lord, for Your grace tonight, we thank You for what we have in common in our Lord Jesus, we thank You for the communion of the saints and the fellowship in the Holy Spirit. We just pray now, Lord, that we might know Your omnipotent power to be operative in our lives. Lord we need You to come tonight - and, listen Lord, I don't want to talk about Your power as if it's something conceptual or theoretical, I want, Lord, You to display Your power tonight, to show Your power, to show that You are the same today as You always have been. So I say with the psalmist tonight: 'Summon Your power, O God; show us Your strength, our God, as You have done before'. You haven't changed - we believe, Lord, help our unbelief. We take authority in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ over any spirit of unbelief, or doubt, or tradition, or religion that might be working to cause us to disbelieve in Your power, Father. May You give us a revelation tonight to our minds and spirits, that You are able to do exceeding abundantly more than we ask or think, through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray, Amen.

Our faith is supernatural, and it's vital that you come to that realisation. The whole of Christianity, well, it's built, of course, on the greatest miracle of all - the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, His burial, and subsequent resurrection on the third day - it's all miraculous! When you come to faith in Jesus Christ, it's not just a mere human decision - and we have to realise that today, because often that's all that Christianity is for people, just a decision of what they're going to do with their life, turning over a new leaf, or going a new avenue - but, no, it's more than that! Salvation is a miracle, and the conviction of the Holy Spirit comes upon us - John 14, John 16 - and we realise our sin, and we then respond to the grace of God, and we trust in Christ, repenting of our sins. There is this work of regeneration that takes place in our lives, where we are given a new heart and the very life of God comes to our being.

Paul made that timeless statement: 'It is not I, but Christ who lives in me'. I may have said it on another evening, but you've got to understand very quickly, when you become a Christian, that you cannot live the Christian life. The Christian life is utterly impossible to live - it is the very life of God, the life of Christ that is lived in us through the power and instrumentality of the Holy Spirit. The sooner you give up and die the better! Maybe you're struggling tonight with this Christian thing, and you really can't make it work - well, praise God for that, because you can't make it work! It's time you gave up and gave over to God - I'm not saying that you don't have a part to play, you have to cooperate with God, but it is that life, that very nature of God in us. Someone once described to me what is to surf - and I've never surfed and probably never will surf! You would know that to look at me! I'm told that what you do is, you go with the wave, you just go with the power of the wave - and that's what it's like to live the

Christian life. There is this dynamic of the Holy Spirit poured out at Pentecost, we saw the miraculous change that that made in the life of the early disciples, but we have got to go with that flow - we've got to cooperate with the Holy Spirit and allow God's life to be lived through us. So from new birth, when we are born again - and I trust you are born again tonight - right through to sanctification, this whole process of being conformed to the image of God's Son, it's all by the power of the life of God in the Holy Spirit - it's impossible to live this life without the supernatural. So if you're not into the supernatural, you're really not into Christianity - it's as simple as that.

This story of Christianity is punctuated with the miraculous. As soon as you read the stories of the Gospels and the book of the Acts, they are filled with signs and wonders attesting to the power and the claims of God. If you look at chapter 2 and verse 22, the Day of Pentecost, we read this last night, our first verse that we read in our reading, this great Pentecostal sermon of the apostle Peter - he said: 'Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know'. The supernatural was an attestation that Jesus was who He said He was, that His message had the divine imprimatur, the stamp of authority that God's power was behind His Christ. So to reject the supernatural, in a sense, is to reject Christ. I know that's a strong statement, but it's something you have to come to terms with if you have an aversion at all to the supernatural.

Now that aversion might come from abuses and misuses of supposed supernatural phenomena in the name of Christ. We must beware tonight - it would be wrong of me to preach on this subject without a caveat: we must beware of the unhealthy lust that there often is for supernatural phenomena. Some Christians are like twister chasers - have you seen them boys? They're mad, they have a drive to chase tornadoes, and to journey right into the midst of a tornado just for thrill and for an adrenaline rush. They are addicts to adrenaline - and there are people who are like that in the spirit, they are just hunting the latest spiritual thrill and high. They seek 'a new anointing', they want a new buzz, and so they hop from meeting to meeting, and conference to conference, to get zapped with the latest thing that God apparently is doing. They are like supernatural junkies, craving a bigger high than the last one. I have to say that some parts of Christendom have become veritable spiritual Disneyland when it comes to this sort of stuff. People are driven solely by the need to tantalise the sensory faculties of the body and the mind.

Now not only is this suspect on many levels, it is highly dangerous. We ought to remember that Satan is also a supernatural being, and Satan can arrange supernatural phenomena to satisfy the superficial seeker. You remember how Pharaoh's magicians were able to duplicate some of the miracles that Moses did in the name of the Lord. Paul the apostle warned the church in Corinth that Satan himself is able to transform himself into an angel of light. Just because something is supernatural does not mean it has come from the Divine source, that it is holy and of God. So there are strange powers that can manifest themselves, so you have to be very careful in just seeking some spiritual thrill.

Then there are those who are more like illusionists, and what I mean by that is: they try to manufacture the appearance of the supernatural to help people believe that God is all-powerful - and surely that is one of the most innovative forms of bearing false witness that you will ever see. It's lying! God doesn't need your help to do a miracle,

or to counterfeit one - as if God needed our childish skits to kickstart His omnipotent power! Vance Havner once quipped: 'Jesus performed miracles, but didn't advertise them. We advertise them, but don't perform them'. Here's a passing rule of thumb when it comes to the supernatural and the miraculous that will help you: beware of any trend that does not emphasise two things - one, the person and centrality of Jesus Christ. First John tells us it is another spirit that denies the Father and the Son, in fact it is the spirit of antichrist. So whenever you get a trend that is totally obsessed with the Holy Spirit at the expense of the Father and Jesus Christ, His Son, it is more than likely not the Spirit of God. Secondly: beware of any trend that does not emphasise a deepening spiritual experience of holiness. A lot of the emphasis is on a soul-ish lust - that is the soul, I believe, being the mind, and the emotions, and the will - those who are looking a mental tantalisation, or an emotional sensual experience, but there is no depth to it in the spiritual. There is no desire to be Christ-like, to be more holy - and that leads you into doors of danger where New Age practices are rife in certain circles, I believe, of Christendom. Others, and I tend to agree with them, believe that false spirits have even invaded the church under the label of the Holy Spirit.

I will be preaching tonight that we need to be open to the Holy Spirit and the supernatural, miraculous power of God - but that does not require you to be a gullible fool, and just swallow everything that you're told is God's power. On the contrary, Paul tells us to be careful - turn with me to 1 Thessalonians 5, and here's the biblical balance that we all must seek to strike, and must be struck in the church, verse 19 of 1 Thessalonians 5: 'Do not quench the Spirit' - so we're not to be anti-the works or the gifts or the signs or the instrumentality of the Spirit - no, no, no. We're not to quench His moving, we're - verse 20 - not to despise prophecies, but we are - verse 21 - to test all things, to weigh everything, and to hold fast what is good and abstain from every form of evil. So we are to test the spirits and see what is of God and what is counterfeit, and there will be counterfeit expressions of spiritual life - but we are to have that discernment, which is also a gift of God, to know what is the true, and to hold on to the true and reject that which is false.

That being said, the tragedy is that the fear of the counterfeit in many circles, particularly those most biblically literate circles - conservative, evangelical, Bible believing churches - the fear of the counterfeit and the spiritually perverse has robbed many of the desire for and expectation of the supernatural. I believe it's a masterstroke of the enemy: he wants you to be afraid of the Holy Spirit and His work in us. Well, are you? I mean be honest: all of us, maybe, are a little bit nervous about the Holy Spirit. God never intended it to be that way. Look with me at the gospel of Luke, chapter 11 - remember this is the same chap writing the book of Acts, it's more than likely one book with two volumes, as we saw on Sunday night. Luke 11, and you remember that this is the portion of Scripture I referred to as the promise that we have, our birthright: 'If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!', verse 13. So that's the context of the Holy Spirit, and in verse 11 we read that Jesus said: 'If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone?', if he wants food is he going to give him gravel? 'Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent?', if he wants to be fed on the sustenance of a fish, will he give him something poisonous and harmful? 'Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion?', a scorpion to sting him and kill him? The implication here is that the Lord of Glory in Heaven, your Abba Father, is not going to give you anything that's harmful. If you open up to Him, to the full ramifications of all the supernatural life that He has,

and you do beware of anything counterfeit or not of God, but you trust Him, your life is before Him, surrendered, He is not going to give you anything to harm you - you don't need to be afraid of the Holy Spirit!

Acts, if ever there was a book, shows us that when God acts, when He does His work His way, the miraculous is displayed. Look at chapter 3 till we see this miracle that the prayer that we read together was a response to, chapter 3 and the first 10 verses we're going to read: 'Now Peter and John went up together to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour. And a certain man lame from his mother's womb was carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, to ask alms from those who entered the temple; who, seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, asked for alms. And fixing his eyes on him, with John, Peter said, 'Look at us' - look at us! I wonder could we say that? We maybe say [*despairingly*] 'Look at us!', but they said 'Look on us', there was something in them, there was a power deposited in their lives that they knew could, in a certain way, be communicated to this lame man to help him. They hadn't any money, but they had something that could be seen when they were looked upon. Incredible, isn't it? What does the world see when they look at the church today? Verse 5: 'So he gave them his attention, expecting to receive something from them. Then Peter said, 'Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk'. And he took him by the right hand and lifted him up, and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength. So he, leaping up, stood and walked and entered the temple with them; walking, leaping, and praising God. And all the people saw him walking and praising God. Then they knew that it was he who sat begging alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him'.

'Look at us!'. Remember I quoted to you last evening, considering the bold witness that the early disciples had, 1 Thessalonians 1:5? I'll read to you again: 'For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance', but here's how the verse ends, 'as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake'. You see, part of the power of the Gospel is integrity of those who minister the Gospel. Peter and John could say, 'Look on us!', because there was something in their life that was emanating - that's what Jesus said, 'The Holy Spirit will be in you, rivers of living water that would spring up unto eternal life', but that they would flow out to touch those that you come into contact with. That's what is meant to happen! Those whom we encounter are affected by the power of the Holy Spirit in us! Paul says: 'We didn't just preach to you, but the gospel came in power - and you know the kind of folk we were, because we lived among you. You knew we were the real deal'. 'Look on us!'.

This man was healed by the power of God, and I believe that power is the same today as it ever was. I believe Acts, and this chapter, is a fulfilment of what Jesus said in Mark 16, if you look back at it. Mark 16:17, Jesus said: 'And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover'. We see this played out in the Acts of the Apostles. Incidentally, these last two verses of Mark 16 are almost a summary of what goes on in Acts - look at 19 and 20: 'So then, after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them

and confirming the word through the accompanying signs. Amen'. You see it, don't you? You do see it, don't you? It's been there all that time - when God acts, and He does His work His way, there is a miraculous display of Divine power. In this instance of this healing of the lame man and in other miracles, there is a platform that is erected for the preaching of the Gospel. We see it in chapter 3 of Acts, if you go there, verse 11, the response: 'Now as the lame man who was healed held on to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the porch which is called Solomon's, greatly amazed. So when Peter saw it, he responded to the people: 'Men of Israel, why do you marvel at this? Or why look so intently at us, as though by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His Servant Jesus, whom you delivered...' - and you know the rest of the sermon, we read it last night. He goes into this great discourse of preaching the Gospel. The miraculous became an attestation, a platform for them to preach the Gospel.

Now here's a little warning again: beware of any ministries or emphasis on the miraculous at the expense of the preaching of the Gospel. There are a lot of trends and movements that emphasise the supernatural, but you'll never hear the Gospel - it's all about miracles, but you'll not hear about how to have your sins forgiven and have peace with God. You see, the miraculous is never an end in itself, but it is to verify the message, to attest to the power and the claims of Almighty God and His Servant, Jesus Christ. It was the undeniable nature of the miraculous in the Acts that shook the authorities, particularly in reaction to this miracle. Look at chapter 4 verse 16, they didn't doubt these miracles, they said: 'What shall we do to these men? For, indeed, that a notable miracle has been done through them is evident to all who dwell in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it'. They couldn't deny it, but do you know what they're going to do? They're going to suppress it. Now, what kind of religious spirit would do the like of that? Verse 17: "But so that it spreads no further among the people, let us severely threaten them, that from now on they speak to no man in this name'. So they called them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus'. It was in response to that that they prayed for God to stretch forth His arm, and to attest to their claims and the preaching of the Gospel.

They knew that there was a need for genuinely supernatural acts to vindicate the claims of God's truth, but healings were not the only demonstration of God's power in the Acts of the Apostles. In chapter 9, we're not going to read it, but in chapter 9 there are visions, in chapter 9 there is the raising to life of Dorcas, or she is also known as Tabitha, and in reaction to that in the city of Joppa many believed, it says, because of the supernatural power of God. We also read of a man called Eutychus in chapter 20, some of you can identify with him tonight - he fell asleep in a very long-winded session with Paul the apostle, and he was perched on the windowsill and he fell off and died. Paul came, and there was a miracle, he was resurrected or revived. In chapter 12 we read about Peter, he was freed from prison by an angelic host, by angelic interventions. Do you believe in angels? Now we're not to worship angels, and we're not even to look for angels in a sense - we are to worship the Living God - and yet the Bible tells us that there are angels who are ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for those who inherit salvation, Hebrews 1 verse 14. We see miracles by the hands of angels in the Acts, we see the gifts of the Holy Spirit evidenced in tongues, in prophecies, even prophetesses ministering in the name of Jesus. We see deliverance, where people are free from all sorts of spirits and demons. We see a slave girl delivered of a spirit of divination, fortune-telling.

Turn with me to Acts chapter 19 and verse 11, Paul is in Ephesus, and we see: 'God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons were brought from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them. Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists took it upon themselves to call the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, 'We exorcise you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches' - these were not Christians, they were Jews. They saw what Paul was doing, they saw it was effective, and they saw that it was in the name of Jesus, so they copied him. 'There were seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, who did so. And the evil spirit answered and said', this is quite humorous, if it wasn't so serious, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?'. Then the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, overpowered them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded'. The demonic man beat them up, basically.

Verse 17, look at the reaction because of this supernatural occurrence, and this deliverance or at least attempt at it: 'This became known both to all Jews and Greeks dwelling in Ephesus; and fear fell on them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified', now look at the response of the Christians, 'And many who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds'. The result here was not tantalising excitement, but godly fear and reverence, and it led to repentance among the church. The English Standard Version reads in verse 18: 'Also many of those who were now believers came confessing and divulging their practices' - the implication was that these Ephesians had been dabbling in dark arts, traditional spiritual occultish practices, and they had one foot in the Kingdom of God but they also remained with one foot in these practices. When they saw what the devil could do when you're in contract with him, even a Christian, fear came upon them - and they brought all the things that they had, dubious instruments, and I don't know what it was, books of spells and what have you, and they brought them all together and they burnt them. It says in verse 19: 'Many of those who had practiced magic brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted up the value of them, and it totaled fifty thousand pieces of silver' - that's 50,000 drachma, and one drachma was a day's wage in those days. I googled it, I'm not sure if you'll agree with it or not, but they tell me that £95 is a day's wage today in the United Kingdom, and if you multiply that by 50,000 that comes to a cool £4,750,000 - that's the worth of all these artefacts that they brought together to destroy. Look at the result in verse 20: 'So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed'. I'll tell you, there's a lot of people in Ulster, there's a lot of people that need in Ireland as a whole, the United Kingdom, and even Europe, they name the name of Christ but they need to finish with dark arts, they need to finish with secret societies, they need to finish with family charms. You might fall out with me for saying some of the things I'm going to say tonight and on subsequent nights, but I can go away from here - and you don't have to invite me back - but I've got to tell you what God has spoken to me. What God tells me is that many are like these Ephesians, they are dabbling in the kingdom of darkness and think it's all right - and it's not.

But there is deliverance, praise God, and it's for today. We've touched on so many supernatural things, but I want to ask you tonight: are you sure you really want the supernatural when you look at this? I mean, are you sure? Turn with me to chapter 5 - everybody wants a revival, don't they? We all want revival - hmmm - wait till you see what happens when God comes in power and does His work His way. Acts 5 verse 1: 'A

certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession. And he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, 'Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God'. Now the problem was not that they didn't give everything, the problem was they gave the impression they were giving everything, but they didn't, they kept back some. God doesn't require you to necessarily sell everything you have and give it, although God might lead you to do that - but that wasn't the sin, the sin was that they gave the impression they were doing something that they weren't doing. They lied to the Holy Ghost, they lied to God - look at the result, verse 5: 'Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last'. What? A lot of people want to fall down under the power of God, but they don't want to breathe their last! You can fall down under the power of God, but this is something strange: 'Great fear came upon all those who heard these sayings' - and the wife then came in later, and exactly the same thing happened to her. Do you want the supernatural? I mean, who doesn't want a miracle - but this is not visiting some gifted person in a tent at the town fair and getting your future told, that's not God's supernatural. God's supernatural requires repentance, it requires surrender and dedication - and godly fear came upon them all.

Now, let me deal with some potential objections there might be. 'Hold on a minute now! Is this not a minefield of dangers?'. I mean, take healing for instance, I mean is that not full of traps and potential heartache and pain for people who are suffering, and so on and so on. Of course it is - but there are dangers with many things. Jesus said there is danger with praying, there is a danger with fasting, there is a danger with almsgiving - but we don't reject praying, fasting, and almsgiving, do we, because there are dangers with them? Others say: 'Well, is this not something that was unique to the apostles, and when the apostles died out, then this power died out?'. Well, I've already said to you in our introduction on Sunday evening, Acts is not about the apostles alone. It's not really about what the apostles did - as I said to you then, we read a lot about Peter and Paul, but almost nothing about the other apostles. In fact characters like Stephen and Philip have a greater prominence in the book - why? Because this is not a history of the apostles and what they did, it's an account of the acts of God's Spirit through ordinary disciples.

Turn to chapter 9 till I show you this, chapter 9 verse 10. Paul the apostle has met the risen Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus, and he has been converted. There is an instruction given to a man called Ananias, verse 10: 'Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, 'Ananias'. And he said, 'Here I am, Lord' - that's very matter-of-fact. If the Lord appeared to you in a vision what would you do? 'Here I am, Lord'. So the Lord said to him, 'Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying'. I love verse 10, it says: 'a certain disciple'. Was Ananias an apostle, was he? If he was, I never heard of him. He was a disciple, that's all he's called here, a certain disciple - but look what he experienced. He experienced a vision, he experienced the risen Lord Jesus speaking to him, he experiences divine direction - that's all just in verse 10. Then we see he reaches Paul where he's residing in verse 17: 'Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on Paul', previously Saul, 'he said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the

Holy Spirit'. Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized'. So this certain disciple, non-apostle, a guy we don't really know much about at all other than that he was a Christian - he has visions, direction from God, he goes and acts in obedience to that revelation, he lays hands on Paul, he heals Paul, Paul not only is healed but he receives a filling of the Holy Spirit. In verse 18 this ordinary Christian baptises Saul in water, and in verse 19 the implication is: 'So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus' - in all likelihood this man Ananias also discipled Saul for a little time. Was he a big shot? Whatever a big shot is? He was just 'a certain disciple'.

What Jesus began to do and to teach that we read about in Luke's gospel is not just continued by the apostles and the early church historically, but by every disciple that would follow - God wants to act through you! When God does His work His way, it's not through the clergy, it's through the Body. When He does His work His way, He releases the Spirit upon all flesh. There is a bold witness coming from every believer, and the miraculous is displayed even in the life of ordinary Christians. It's just disciples that we are reading about here in Acts, I mean, where do you look in the Bible to find out what a disciple is like? Well, you could go to the Gospels, and you will read there what Jesus requires of a disciple, what He expects of a disciple. You can even read about the experiences of the first disciples, the 12 and the 70 who followed Christ, but that was all before the cross, that was before the resurrection and the ascension, and the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost. The only place that you can see historically what a disciple is like is the Acts - and what is it like? This is authentic Christianity, I believe.

But here's the big question: why do we not see this? Why do we not see it more, at least, today? I'll put my hands up, I believe there is a shortfall of this supernatural power at work in the church, certainly in the Western world and here in Ulster - I have no doubt about that. I know God's power is being displayed, I know that, but it's certainly not the way it was in the Acts, and the way I would like it to be. But here's a little warning: people would say to me when I preach like this, 'Oh, no, no, be careful now, don't argue from experience, don't argue from experience. People have all sorts of experiences, but you must not argue from experience' - well, what are you doing when you say to me, 'Oh, I haven't seen any of these things happen'? What are you doing only arguing from experience, lack of it? You haven't seen it, so you don't believe it. There are many reasons why we don't believe in these things today, there is a materialist Western psyche that we don't even realise we've been inoculated by from our education. From we are knee-high we are taught by empirical science to only consider those things around us that we can see and experience with the senses to be real. But people in other parts of the world aren't like that, and so when they become Christians they instinctively understand in the spiritual realm - of course they need instruction and teaching in truth, but nevertheless there is a belief - but we have been effectively educated against spiritual realities, and the great tragedy is that it's not just done in a biology or physics classroom, it's done in churches! We are encouraged to disbelieve in the supernatural, there are whole theologies that are devised to explain away the supernatural power of God - 'I have never seen it, so I don't believe it'.

Well, let me ask you: why does it appear that many of these signs are quite common in certain places of our world, particularly on the mission field; and some of the church, particularly in Third World countries, are experiencing the miraculous and the supernatural in ways that we could only dream - but we aren't? Why is it? May I make

a suggestion to you: could it be because they are looking for it? James said: 'You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war' - that's like a description of Northern Ireland, isn't it, the church in Northern Ireland alone? - 'Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive', so some people are asking, but they don't get, 'because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures'. Some people do want supernatural experience and miraculous dealings of God, they want it just for the thrill, just for the buzz, or just to be able to say, 'Oh, that has happened to me and it hasn't happened to you' - they don't actually say that, but that's what they mean. Are you seeking and asking God? Paul said 'desire earnestly the best gifts that God's Spirit has to give'. Remember Luke chapter 11 that we were reading there, about how God wouldn't give us anything harmful - again, in the context of seeking the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus says, listen: 'So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened' - in the context of this power of the Holy Spirit, that there is much more of that our Heavenly Father wants to give us.

So, have you asked Him? Do you seek after this? Not in a carnal way - you've got to realise, God responds to faith, God rises to expectancy. Hebrews 11:6: 'He who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him'. If you're not expecting the miraculous, it ain't going to happen - unless God is very gracious to you. But if there is a little openness in your life to the supernatural, to God's dealings with you, and you come and you ask in faith - I believe God will respond to you. He might require you to do certain things... but perhaps most significantly, the reason why I believe many of us in the West are not experiencing God's supernatural power is that we are not honouring the commission of our Lord Jesus Christ in going forth with the Gospel. You see, the Lord Jesus said it would be when we were bold witnesses to Him that these signs would accompany our preaching to verify and vindicate the message. It is as we go that He has promised this great power to us.

Look at Matthew 28, 'The Great Commission' we call it, Matthew 28, we read the counterpart from Mark. Matthew 28 verses 18-20: 'Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe'', that literally means 'put into practice', "all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age". I think I'm right in saying that in the whole of the Acts there are 40 miracles, 40 - and 39 of them took place in the marketplace, the Market Square. Isn't that interesting? As the early church went out of the walls, whatever walls they did have, and went into the community with the truth, God verified the message with signs following. Do you remember where the disciples were before Pentecost, they were in an Upper Room praying - and what happened? The Holy Ghost came, and what did the Holy Spirit do? He flushed them out into the street!

I think this is beautiful, this glass business [in the new church building]. It reminded me of that book 'The Church without Walls' - maybe that was the idea behind it, I don't know, but the community can see. Ah, but you need more than a glass window, you need to get out there! Is there not something here, am I not touching on something, that it is our reluctance to go forward with the Gospel and to pay a price for it - like we talked about last night - that's one of the great reasons not just we're not seeking the

supernatural, or we've got theology that debunks it, but we're not prepared to go and do what Jesus said, and then He said, 'These signs will follow'? Duncan Campbell, the great man of God in the Faith Mission who was used in the Hebridean revival, he said: 'Our need is for a demonstration of the supernatural, lifting men from the plane of the ordinary to the realm of the extraordinary, to the higher heights of God's realisation'. That's what we need, I believe, that's what I believe 21st-century United Kingdom and Ireland needs more than ever - Europe, Western Europe, in all their pride, in all their education, in all their civilisation and sophistication, need raw demonstrations of the power of God. In this sceptical, materialistic society, we need God to show His arm again!

During the Lewis revival, Duncan Campbell and about 30 men gathered to pray - and this is his account with which I finish. He said: 'While the hours were passing by, I found myself fighting and not getting anywhere in prayer. After midnight, I turned to a young man and said, 'I feel led by God to ask you to pray'. This dear man got up and said, 'O God, You made a promise to pour water upon him that is thirsty and floods upon the dry ground, and, Lord, it's not happening'. He paused and then continued, 'Lord, I don't know how the others here stand in Your presence; I don't know how the minister stands, but, Lord, if I know anything about my own heart I stand before You as an empty vessel, thirsting for You and for a manifestation of Your power'. He halted again, and then after a moment of tense silence he cried out to God, 'O God, Your honour is at stake, and I now challenge You to fulfil Your covenant engagement and do what You have promised to do'. Duncan Campbell says, 'Believe it or not - and you can check it if you like - the house was shaking like a leaf, the dishes were clattering on the sideboard'. Campbell says that an elder who was standing next to him remarked, 'Mr. Campbell, an earthquake'. He said, 'Yes'. He gave the blessing right away, and when they went outside of that home, Duncan Campbell says they found the community awake with the awareness of the presence of God. Men and women were carrying chairs and stools and asked: 'Is there any room in the church?'

I think that account is nothing but what we read here in Acts chapter 4, read it again with me in closing, verses 29 to 31 - and you tell me that God is not the same, you tell me that He's not the same! Dare to tell me that He's not the same! Dare to tell me that the power of God died with the apostles! Dare to tell me that this power was only necessary for the first 150 years of the church, but we don't need it now, we know better! Pray with me, along with these apostles tonight, verse 29: "Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word", what's coming first? Bold witness! "By stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus'. And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness'.

When God acts and He does His work His way, the miraculous is displayed - what do you know of it? Let us pray. Has God spoken to you? I'm not going to make any form of appeal or public display in anyway tonight, but I want you - where you are - and I just take these few moments to make space for you to deal with God. There is much more. Are you satisfied with 'read your Bible, pray every day if you want to grow'? Are you satisfied with Sunday-go-to-meeting, and maybe if you're extra special the prayer meeting? Or do you want to know this God of the Bible who has not changed? We have changed, we have erected edifices of tradition and religion that has blocked the Lord

getting into our lives and into our churches. I believe, in this country, and particularly in Ireland, but particularly in the north, there are strongholds, spiritual strongholds of religion in the heavenly realms that are actually battling against the extension of God's Kingdom - and they need to be broken down. Do you know where they will be broken down? In the churches, because the churches invented the half of them!

Now, you deal with God - you're not responsible for anyone else but yourself. If you have a hunger and thirst and a desire after God, you tell Him. You might need to repent of sin, you might need to confess it before the Lord, you might need delivered of something - there might be a stronghold in your life, some people don't get through to the fullness of the Spirit because of all sorts of associations in their life, all sorts of things they dabbled with even before they were converted. That's controversial to some people, but I've seen it. Some people are involved with organisations like the Masonic, organisations based on the Masonic in our land - I'm sorry if I offend you, but I must tell it as it is. You've taken oaths on your life and upon your family, and it's affecting the spiritual life and health of you and your children and your grandchildren. It's time we got real: we cannot go forward until these strongholds are pulled down. God's word says you have got the tools to do the job, the weapons of your warfare are mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds - but the church has got to do it herself!

If we want the Lord we're going to have to do some breaking up of fallow ground, but it is time, it is time to seek the Lord. You deal with the Lord, just in the quietness - cry out to Him from your heart: 'Lord, much more, I want to know You more. Deep within my heart, Lord, I want to know You. I don't want to know what others say about You, I want to know You for myself, personally. I don't want second-hand information, I want first-hand relationship. I want to have everything that You have for me'. I believe everything the Bible says about the Holy Spirit, everything - I didn't always, but I do now - and I want everything that God has for me. I hope you'll not fall out with me, but if you do - well, that's just tough, because I want God, I want God, I want all that He has! All that Jesus purchased for me with His precious blood, I want it all! All of His resurrection power flowing through me - I'm one spirit with the resurrected Christ, and I want His resurrected life now! I don't want to wait until He comes again to get it - although it will not be complete until then - but I want it now! Who wants it now? Or are we just playing at this thing?

Father, bless Your word, and help us to be real with You - but we cry to You tonight: You be real to us! Blessed Father, I pray that there will be those tonight who will feel the kindling of the sacred flame upon their spirits tonight, that they will know the witness of Your Spirit with their spirit, that they are sons and daughters of God; that they might know the joy of full salvation, they may know the victory that is this life of faith, the life of Christ in you, the hope of glory. Deliver people tonight from religiosity, from the power of the flesh, and even the powers of darkness. Lord, set us free, like Lazarus, in the resurrected life - let us loose, and let us go for Your glory. May there even be signs following the preaching tonight - for the glory of Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

When God ACTS! - Chapter 4

"Unity In The Body"

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by David Legge*

We're turning tonight to Acts chapter 4. Just to fill you in if you haven't been here on previous nights, or have missed one or two - we're looking, as I said, at the book of Acts, under the heading "When God ACTS!", what happens when God does His work His way. On Sunday evening we had a sort of introduction, and we looked at how, when God does His work, 'The Gift Of The Holy Spirit Is Released'. Then on Monday evening we looked at how there will be 'Boldness in Witness'; and last night we looked at how, when God is at work, 'The Miraculous Is Displayed'. Tonight we're going to look at how, when God does His work His way, there is 'Unity in the Body'. Tomorrow evening, God willing, we will look at how there is 'Missionary Expansion', the Gospel is taken to farther fields when God is doing His work.

Tonight we're looking at how there is 'Unity in the Body', and we're looking at chapter 4 - where we have been, I think, for the last two nights here and there - and we are taking up the reading just where we left off. You remember this marvellous prayer by the apostles, we saw it last night, that God would stretch out His hand to heal - verse 30 - and that signs and wonders would be done 'through the name of Your Holy Servant, Jesus'. What a wonderful thing that was, and to see in verse 31 the actual house shaken as they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. But we're looking at verse 32 now to the end of the chapter: *"Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own", no one claimed exclusive possession of what he owned, "but they had all things in common", they shared everything. "And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all. Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need. And Joses", or Joseph, "who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated Son of Encouragement), a Levite of the country of Cyprus, having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet".*

Let's come to the Lord again, and as I have asked you each night before I preach: I want you to pray now specifically for yourself, that God will speak to you tonight. We do want the presence of God to come among us, we want to all be blessed, and I need help as the preacher - but I want you to particularly come to the Lord for yourself, would you do that? Ask the Lord to speak to you tonight. Please pray that, I believe that's a prayer God answers if you pray it sincerely from your heart. So let's come: Holy, Heavenly Abba Father, we bless Your name, we bless You that You are the Thrice Holy God - Holy, Holy, Holy. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit we come to You now. We want to exalt You and praise You as the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity. We thank You that You have come to us in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. We bless You that Jesus has come in our own flesh, apart from sin, to be our Redeemer. He has suffered and died for us, He has shed His blood. We thank

You that He has cleansed us from our sins, we thank You that He has conquered Satan, death, and hell itself. We thank You that we are more than conquerors through Him tonight, and we want to invoke by faith the mighty name and claim of the Lord Jesus Christ - His death and His resurrection. We take authority tonight over anything that is contrary to His will and His Kingdom reign, and we bind any force of darkness in this place tonight. We declare to the heavenly realms that they have no authority here, and in the name of Jesus we overcome. We pray, Father tonight, that there will be a mighty release of the Holy Spirit's power, that You will come suddenly into Your Temple, into our lives, and that You will take a dealing with each of us. Lord, we need You, our families need you, this church needs you, the church in Magherafelt needs you, the church in Ulster, and in Ireland, and the United Kingdom - Lord, we need a fresh breath of Your Spirit. O, that You would breathe upon us tonight, Living God! Lord, bring prophetic word this evening, and may we have that New Testament Acts experience that we are cut to the heart, that we will not fight with You tonight but that we will surrender to what we are hearing You say - even if it is against the grain and uncomfortable to us. So Lord, come, we pray. We only want to hear Your voice, that's all we're interested in, Your mind and Your heart. So come Lord Jesus, come Holy Spirit. Amen.

You see clearly from these verses we read from chapter 4 'Unity in the Body'. We see it right throughout the Acts of the Apostles, and of course it's taught throughout the rest of the New Testament. There is one word that really sums up the concept of unity, it is a symptom of love. Love, Jesus very clearly said, was to be the mark of a true disciple. A follower of Christ was to be known by their love. He said that explicitly in John 13:35: 'By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another'. You remember that Jewish lawyer, that student of the Torah, the Laws of God, who came to the Lord Jesus on one occasion and tested Him, asking Him: 'Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?'. The Lord Jesus responded, saying to him: 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind'. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets'. What the Lord Jesus was doing there was, He was establishing love as the highest of all spiritual virtues. He said that it sums up the whole of the Law and the Prophets. To put it in contemporary language, and to paraphrase that, Jesus was basically saying: 'Love is what the Bible is all about' - that's what the Law and the Prophets are, the Bible. So if you were to sum up the whole theme of this book that you cherish, I hope tonight, it is 'love'. We as God's people, and disciples of Christ, are to be known primarily for this virtue and attribute: that we love one another, and that we lavish love on others who are unlovely and unlovable.

That's the way the early church was, even secular history accounts for this. Describing the first century Christians to the Roman Emperor Hadrian, Aristides said - I quote him: 'They love one another. They never fail to help widows. They save orphans from those who will hurt them. If they have something, they give it freely to the man who has nothing. If they see a stranger they take him home, and are happy as though he were a real brother. They don't consider themselves brothers or sisters in the usual sense, but brothers instead through the Spirit in God'. Now it's very clear from a casual reading of the New Testament that love is an essential - but I fear that as Christians, particularly in our modern era, and - I have to say it again, as folk who value the holy Scriptures, we might call ourselves 'conservative evangelicals' - we have often dispensed of love in favour of truth. That might shock some of you, me saying that -

but that's often a choice that is made. We feel that we have to choose truth, and we can be very angry and even aggressive in our expression of truth, at the expense of love - when, in fact, love is truth. It is not one or the other, and indeed we've got to get away - I believe - as Christians from understanding truth as doctrinal and theoretical, and really come to terms with the fact that Jesus said: 'I am the truth'. The truth is not a theory or a dogma, the truth is not a creed or a confession, the truth is a Person! If you want to know the truth, you've got to get to know the Lord Jesus Christ. That's the only thing, really, I'm interested in - not what somebody believes, in the sense of ticking a box of various statements of faith, but I want to have fellowship with people who know the truth, that is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as their Saviour and Lord. Love is truth, and the only truth is Jesus Christ - and He is love. So you cannot separate love and truth.

Gayle D. Erwin wrote a book called 'The Jesus Style', and in it he says: 'I was shocked to find that such a statement', that is 'Love one another', 'was missing from the great doctrinal statements of denominations, missing from the great systematic theologies, missing from the creedal statements and, most unfortunate, missing from our daily lives'. Isn't that interesting? You think about it: love is missing from a lot of our great doctrinal works, that says something in itself. Yet it is tragic, because it gives the impression that it's all right to have truth, per se, and it's even possible to have truth, devoid from love. It minimises the importance of love, it puts it down there - in fact, it even eradicates it from existence, doesn't even tangibly admit its necessity - and yet the Lord Jesus Christ put it at the very top of all spiritual qualifications.

Paul the apostle, inspired by the Holy Spirit, in that great purple passage, 1 Corinthians 13, said: you can have all that you like, you can speak with the tongues of men and angels, you can understand great mysteries, you can prophesy, you can even give your body to be burned and be a martyr - but if you don't have love, you are nothing! A flat zero in the spiritual realm! Strong stuff, isn't it? This is how important love is! Your own John Calvin said: 'Whatever is devoid of love is of no account in the sight of God'. It's nothing! You can have all the truth you like, but if you don't have love it's nothing, God says! Wow.

We see this love for one another manifest in the early church in their unity in verse 32: 'they were of one heart and one soul' - unity of purpose. 'One heart and one mind', some translations say. They were united in their heart, unity of purpose - is that the way this church is? Is that the way the church at large is in our nation? But it was more than that, it was very practical - there was unity of possessions: 'neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common'. Just the way one body would be, your possessions are your possessions, they don't belong to anybody else - and in the Body of Christ everyone shared what they had, so that none lacked. So unity was the fruit of their love for one another. Tertullian, the church father, said of the early Christians: 'How those Christians love one another!'

Let me ask you tonight: what do you think the world sees now in the church of Jesus Christ? What would they say of the church today? I mean, be honest with me: what would they say? Would they say: 'How these Christians love one another!?' You'd only need to be watching the news for the last three weeks to work out what people are saying. Is it too strong to consider that they would say: 'How these Christians hate one another'? Is that too strong? I don't think so! Remember last night I was talking to you

from chapter 4 about the man at the Beautiful Gate, the crippled man whom Peter and John found, and they had no money to give him - he was begging - but they had the power of Jesus of Nazareth, and he went walking, and leaping, and praising God, healed. But do you remember what they said to him in verse 4 of chapter 3, they said to him: 'Look at us!'. Now that's not incidental, that is highly consequential. They were able to say: 'Look at us! And if you look at us you will see the very life and love of Jesus Christ'. Now, if we were to say to people in the world - and let's not go too far universally, let's think of Magherafelt, and I don't know it, I only know Portadown and I know a right bit about it. I live in Portadown and I was born and bred in East Belfast, so I have my own baggage, and I know all about the way the church can be seen in a community. But if we were to say, 'Look at us! Look at us!', what do the people see? Eh? I'm almost sure they will see fighting, somewhere they will see fighting - just tell me if I'm wrong. I'm absolutely sure they will see bigotry, because the church is filled with it. They will see sectarianism, and they will see a party spirit - am I wrong? 'Look at us! Look at us! We've got the truth, we've got the Gospel! We know Jesus!' - and they look at us, and they think, 'Aye!'.

If I was to ask you the question: how many Christian denominations are there in the world? What would you say? Right Jonathan, go on have a stab - how many Christian denominations in the world? It's not a Bible question, so you're allowed to get it wrong! Have a guess - you can't remember? Anybody stab a guess? Christian denominations in the world? 2000, any advance on 2000? It's like a market, isn't it! Any advance on 2000, 2000, 2000? 2000, that's a lot, isn't it? Any advance on 2000 - 7000? Gordon Conwell Seminary in the United States in 2010 did a survey, a research survey, and they found - wait for this - that there are 41,000 denominations taking the name of Christ in the world. Now you can have your freedom of conscience all you like, and you deserve it, and it's your right before God - but you can't convince me that that's what the Lord had in view when He said: 'That they may be one as We are one, Father' in John 17. I'll take a lot of convincing that this is what Jesus meant. Then the theologians will say, 'Oh, but hold on a wee minute, that is the mystical union of the body of Christ in the invisible realm, all together, the spiritual union' - is it really? Turn with me to John 17, what does the Bible really say? Verse 22: 'The glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me'. Jesus was praying that there would be unity in the Body among Christians, so that the world might know that God sent Jesus - now, how are they going to see that if it's invisible? How are they going to know about it if we are fighting with one another, and that's all they know of Christianity? Come on!

It's convenient for us to hide behind our bickering, and our backbiting, and our partisan spirit - but it's an absolute travesty to the name of Christ, and it is an indictment against Christendom at large that this is the very thing that was to mark us, and this is the very thing that was to show the world that we belong to God, and it's the very thing they don't see - but the opposite. First John 4, listen: 'If someone says, 'I love God', and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also'. Some people say, 'Ach, I do God, but I just don't do people' - I can sympathise a wee bit with you, the more I get to know my brother the more I love my dog at times! Isn't that the way we feel? But, you see, we are called to love one another - the unlovable,

when we are unlovely. Our vertical relationship with God, like the cross of Jesus Christ, if we're right with God vertically, we will be right with our brother horizontally - it just follows. In Genesis, you remember chapter 3, God's relationship with man broke down through Adam's sin, and then it wasn't very long after that man's relationship with his brother, Cain and Abel, broke down. If our relationship with God is restored and redeemed, our relationship with one another should be affected, if it's worth anything at all.

But what is it really like in the church? A respected Bible teacher said: 'If there is anything that would keep me away from Christ, if I was lost, it would be the attitude of Christians toward one another' - the dividedness in the Body of Christ, the sectarianism. What did Jesus say about this? Turn with me to Mark chapter 9, what did Jesus say? Surely that would be important? The Head of the church, the One who bled and died for the church, and rose again to give the Body resurrection life - what He says must be important. Mark 9 verse 38: 'John answered Him', Jesus, 'saying, 'Teacher, we saw someone who does not follow us casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow us'. But Jesus said, 'Do not forbid him, for no one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterward speak evil of Me. For he who is not against us is on our side'. What did Jesus say? 'Don't say anything to someone who is working in My name', but the disciples' attitude was: 'Well, he's not with our band! He's not in our group!'. Did that matter to the Lord Jesus? Obviously not. This is a clear statement on sectarianism that He is wanting to invest into His disciples, because it was essential that they know that whoever was not against Him was for Him, and those who were for Him we were to unite with and work with - even if we didn't know them.

What does Paul the apostle say about divides and sectarianism in the Body? Well, look at 1 Corinthians chapter 1 - have you given up? I don't hear the rustling! Don't give up on me yet! First Corinthians chapter 1 verse 10 - I say that and some people are using their mobile phones and all! I nearly ticked a few people off, because I thought they were texting people, and they were on the Bible - I was glad I didn't do that! First Corinthians chapter 1 verse 10: 'Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you', I mean that's emphatic, it's clear, 'but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment'. Paul is only referring back to what it was like in the Acts of the Apostles - unity. 'For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, 'I am of Paul', or 'I am of Apollos', or 'I am of Cephas', that's Peter, 'or 'I am of Christ''. Paul was the forensic mind, the Pharisee of the Pharisees, he had a real hold on Scripture - Peter said some of the things he said were hard to grasp - the high intellects, I'm sure, would have liked Paul, listening to Paul. Then there was Apollos, he was the great orator, he could hold a crowd, fantastic to listen to. Then there was Peter, and he was the man of the people, down to earth, the 5'8" man that the working class fellow could understand, and the common people heard him. Then there was the real exclusive group that said, 'Oh no, we don't follow men, we follow Christ' - but they were so 'holier than thou', that they allowed that attitude to cut themselves off from the rest of the Body, and that was wrong. They were saying: 'Oh, we're the Lord's people' - but they didn't recognise the rest of the Body.

Look at what Paul says in verse 13: 'Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or

were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, lest anyone should say that I had baptized in my own name'. You see, Paul's fear was that someone would found 'The Church of the Great Apostle Paul', that was his fear - and mind you it nearly happened. What does Jesus say about sectarianism? He says it ought not to be in the Body of Christ. What does Paul say about it? He says it ought not to be there, because Christ is not divided. I'm going to make a strong statement: denominationalism cannot be of God. Hear what I'm saying tonight, and think with me, and open your heart with me - because this is vital, I believe, for our land tonight. When Jesus said: 'I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it'. I know where I am tonight, but did He mean the Presbyterian Church? Did He? Did He mean the Methodists? Did He mean the Baptists? Did He mean the Brethren? We could go on - did He mean the Protestants? Did He mean the Catholics? What did the Lord Jesus Christ mean? Now please don't misunderstand what I'm saying tonight, I'm not saying the Lord has not used denominations, and I'm not saying the Lord hasn't used denominational churches - but it was not because of their denominationalism! You need to hear this, in fact I would say that those God does use exhibit the least denominational spirit. God mightily used the Presbyterians in 1859 and in subsequent revivals, and Nicholson was a great Presbyterian - but it wasn't because he was a Presbyterian that God used him, I hope you know that! It wasn't because he was all out for Presbyterianism that God used him - no, the very thing that marked Nicholson was, 'All for Christ! All one in Jesus'. Every move of God has been the same: denominational boundaries seem to just melt away.

Now I'm not talking about false ecumenism that fudges the issue of who God really is, and just all religions together and all professors together - no matter what they believe about God, or no matter what they say the Gospel of Christ is. I'm talking about division that there is in the Body of Christ among those who truly know the Lord Jesus as their Saviour, but they won't have anything to do with one another, or they look down their noses at one another because, 'You don't belong to my group!'. Sectarianism! Party spirit! D.S. Warner said: 'If the doctrine of Christian unity is true, then division and sectarianism are a great and prodigious evil, and therefore ought to be abolished. Who then will lay the axe at the root of this corrupt tree to help cut it down?'. I know this might be a struggle for some of you tonight, but I believe this is from the heart of God - and that's the only reason why I'm bringing it. John Newton who wrote 'Amazing Grace' said: 'If a man is born again, hates sin, and depends upon the Saviour for life and grace, I care not whether he be an Arminian or a Calvinist'. Amen? There wasn't one there! Amen!

You can believe what you believe, I believe what I believe - but let it not separate us if we are in Christ. I remember reading a book not that long ago by David Pawson, 'The Word and the Spirit Together', and he quotes a statement from a preface of a book on eschatology, which is the study of end times, and prophecy, and the second coming of Jesus - and you know there is great controversy in the church of Jesus about how the Lord Jesus is going to come back again. I have my views, and maybe you have yours - but after this man had announced his title and began to couch his argument, he puts this caveat into the book, and warns against using the second coming to divide the body of Christ. This is what he says, listen, I think this is powerful: 'Suppose you're not convinced', I mean by his argument, 'shall we, who are relying on the same Redeemer, begotten by the same God, inhabited by the same Spirit, incorporated in the same Body, entrusted with the same Gospel, assaulted by the same devil, hated by the same world, delivered from the same Hell, and destined for the same Glory, shall we who

have so much in common allow ourselves to be divided in heart or service because - just because - we are of different minds on this matter? God forbid!'. You look at what we have allowed to divide us. I like that little verse that says:

'I don't care what church you belong to,
Just as long as for Calvary you stand.
If your sins have been washed in the Fountain,
You're my brother, so give me your hand'.

I don't care what your background is, I really don't. Now unity is not uniformity, it doesn't mean you have to believe what I believe and I've to believe what you believe - it's all about how we disagree. In Acts there was tension among members in chapter 6, there is a dispute over money - has that ever happened in the church? Oh, you're only after a building project - I don't know anything about it, and I don't want to know anything about it - but disputes over money can happen in churches. There was this row happened because they were collecting all this money, as we saw, together in one pool, and there were Greek speaking Jews who felt that they weren't getting the same cut as the Hebrew speaking Jews - and there was a wee bit of a fight went on. We see that there was disagreement among members, and we even turn to chapter 15 and the great apostle Paul and this man Joseph, who was named Barnabas because he was a son of encouragement, they had a fall out over the head of another disciple, John Mark. So there can be disagreement among leaders. So the early church was not perfect, I don't want to give that impression, but I do believe that they did strive - as Romans says - to, as much as depended on them, to 'live peaceably with all men'. They did their best to stay in fellowship with one another - is that what we do? St Augustine said it's about how we disagree: 'In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, in all things charity'. Love - the fruit of love is unity.

A number of months ago I was at a day conference in Belfast at the King's Hall, and a man called Jim Cymbala, who has written some tremendous books - one of which is 'Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire' - he's the pastor of Brooklyn Tabernacle in America, in New York. He has seen incredible growth in his church, mainly through prayer. He had this day conference in Belfast, and he told a story - many stories, but one of when he started off in ministry. There was an old man of God who met him one day in a restaurant, just to help him out a little and give him a bit of advice. He said: 'Jim, you're going to meet three types of people in your ministry. You're going to meet 'pastor people' - you know, 'My pastor is the best pastor in the world, and there's nobody like my pastor. Nobody preaches like him, nobody visits like him. You want to come and hear our pastor!'. Then he said: 'You're going to meet 'church people', local church people, or denominational people' - 'There's no church like my local church, or like my movement, my denominational persuasion'. Then he said: 'You'll meet a third person, you'll meet 'Kingdom people', people who are passionate for the Kingdom of God, for the Body of Christ'. Wherever you hang your hat, or if you don't have one to hang for that matter, you're passionate for God's people, for the whole unified Body of Christ - and you love them!

What person are you? I know you've got a good pastor, and I'm not saying anything against your church - but I believe the Lord Jesus needs Kingdom people. Remember that old Psalm, Psalm 133: 'Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! For there the LORD commanded the blessing; Life forevermore'. When God acts, a natural outflow of His life, when He does His work His

way, there is unity in the Body of Christ - and divisions fall away! I'm not suggesting that everything changes as we've always known it, but these divisions among us become less important until they almost disappear - and I believe that's what God really wants. They're all going to fall away eventually anyway, as the old man said: 'Those of us who go up, the labels will fall off; and those who go down, they will burn off'. There will be no labels in heaven. We might be singing psalms, I'll give you that! But there will be no divisions.

Where have we come to? Let's be honest! In the light of this primitive Christianity, authentic Christian expression in Acts, and believing that this is a blueprint for how it's meant to be today - where are we? Where are we with one another? Before Andrew Jackson became the President of the United States, he was a general in the Tennessee militia. During the war of 1812 his troops were fighting and bickering among themselves, so he called them together and said: 'Gentlemen, let's remember: the enemy is over there!'. We have a spiritual war to fight in, we're not wrestling with flesh and blood, we're not competing with the other church down the road, or the other denomination, or the other organisation! We're wrestling with principalities and powers, and spiritual wickedness in heavenly places - and while we're fighting among ourselves, the devil is laughing!

Turn with me quickly to Joshua 5, boy this came to me recently - Joshua 5 - I can't remember how it came, but it came, and I was impressed by this. You remember that the children of Israel are conquering the Promised Land, and they're coming up to Jericho - this great city - it's going to be hard to overcome. It says in verse 13 of Joshua 5: 'And it came to pass, when Joshua was by Jericho, that he lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, a Man stood opposite him with His sword drawn in His hand. And Joshua went to Him and said to Him, 'Are You for us or for our adversaries?'. So He said, 'No, but as Commander of the army of the LORD I have now come'. And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped, and said to Him, 'What does my Lord say to His servant?'. Then the Commander of the Lord's army said to Joshua, 'Take your sandal off your foot, for the place where you stand is holy'. And Joshua did so'. Joshua saw this Man with a drawn sword - now I believe it was a pre-incarnate revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, I believe that - here he sees Him, and he's thinking: 'This guy, He looks pretty tough, is He on our side or is He on their side?'. He asks the question: 'Whose side are You on?' - and it was the wrong question! That's the wrong question! We should not be asking: 'Whose side is the Lord on?', but 'Who is on the Lord's side?'. The answer of the Lord to this question was just 'No! I'm not on anybody's side, I don't take sides. You must be on my side'.

Here's a very deep question to you as an individual Christian, and to the church at large: are we following what the Lord is doing? As Jonathan Edwards says: 'Look for what the Redeemer is doing, what His work is, and get behind it' - or are we asking the Lord to bless our wee agenda, and what we're doing in our plans and our ideas? The church in Acts never did that, you see they waited on the Lord to see what His will was, and then they got behind what He was doing. There were two quarrelling sons in a family - and anybody that has boys will know what this is like - 'It's him!', 'No! It's his fault!', 'No! It's his fault!'. The father said: 'Look, you're two brothers, and you've only one father, and I'm not here to take sides, I am here to take over'. That's what the Captain of the Army of the Hosts of the Lord was saying to Joshua that day, and that's what He's saying to the church in Ireland: 'I'm not here to take sides, I'm here to take over! Get out of the way! You follow Me, I'm not on your side, you need to be

on My side. You need to get behind what I'm doing, My agenda!'.

You see, it's the Father's job to maintain peace in the family, isn't it, and to bring stability to the family? And we as children are fighting among ourselves. This love that we are meant to have for one another manifests itself in the fruit of unity, and it is immensely and intensely practical. Don Francisco wrote a song years ago that said: 'Love is not a feeling, it's an act of your will'. Love is very practical, and I'm not sure emotions never play a part in love, but it is true that we must not adopt the world's concept of love as some ecstatic high that we should never descend from - if that's your idea of love, you'll be sadly disappointed in life and in love. It is a choice to do the right thing, even against some of our inner drives and bents. We see it manifested here: love in unity of purpose, one heart, one soul, one mind. We see it manifested in unity of possessions - as one Body, they didn't say 'That's mine and that's yours', but they considered everything that they owned shared with one another.

But we see also unity in prayer, turn with me to chapter 2 verse 42. It says, verse 41: 'Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to the church', that's the Day of Pentecost, 'And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers'. Now you would know I have some notions of my own, maybe, but I believe here what the church has done in modern days is carve these four things into four meetings - when, in all likelihood, I think whenever the church got together, they probably got together on a Sunday evening, and they probably did all these things when they came together. I think that's likely, and I'm sure they met up during the week for various things like prayer, and like study, and encouraging one another, and learning and so forth - but what I'm trying to get at is: they, as members, fellowshiped together. That's what fellowship is you know: coming together for the life's Body, to share it with one another - it's not Sunday-go-to-meeting, that's not fellowship. That's why many people going to church feel starved, and oftentimes walk out feeling worse than they did when they walked in! Some think fellowship is tea and buns after the meeting, and having a wee chat - that's not fellowship! Fellowship is sharing the life of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Body! One of the ways it is expressed is in unity in prayer.

Now I don't want to stray tonight, but sometimes our prayer meetings are more like preaching meetings - and we are praying in a soul-lish way, that means we're actually praying horizontally toward other people to get at them; rather than vertically to God, ignoring who is around us, not trying to score points - that's not fellowship. Prayer meetings, at times, can be a bit of a talent show, to show how much knowledge I have - some of the best sermons I've ever heard were in prayer meetings! As if the Lord needed to learn something - three points and alliteration - that He didn't know! You know, people giving directions to the Lord in prayer - they're not praying at all. We need unity in our prayer meetings, don't we?

We need unity in prayer and the members' fellowship, but the leaders were united as they led. Look at chapter 6, remember there was this bit of a dispute between the Greek speaking Jews and the Hebrew speaking Jews. The apostles, in verse 3, said: 'Brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business', some believe they are like deacons, 'but we', the apostles, 'will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word' - they were united together in understanding what the mind of

God was, the word, and praying and worshipping the Lord! That's how the church moved in their leadership! We see that it is how the church faced crises, they were united together in prayer. Look at chapter 12 - you remember James lost his head, Herod the King beheaded him, and then he saw that that pleased the people and he threw Peter into prison. What did the church do to react to this crisis? Verse 5: 'Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church'. We see what happened, there was a great miracle, and angels came and released Peter from prison - and he ends up, it's quite comical, knocking on the door at the prayer meeting and they don't even believe that it's him!

But when they faced a crisis, what did they do? They went to prayer, they united together in prayer. It's how the church made decisions and moved into the future. Turn to chapter 13, the next chapter - I think, if ever there was a blueprint for how the early church operated, it's Acts chapter 13. Look at verse 1: 'Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers', Body ministry, 'Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. And they ministered to the Lord and fasted'. You see, that's the way the early church made decisions: they sought the Lord. They didn't have a committee meeting, they didn't get some of the folk together who were professional men and had good jobs together, and have a few brain cells to knock between one another, and ask them for their nouse - no, that's not what they did! They put their faces on the floor prostrate before God, and they said: 'What do You want, Lord? What is Your will Lord?'. That is what priestly ministry is about - we believe in the priesthood of all believers, that we've all got a role before God to come and ask Him, there's no go-between now only the Lord Jesus Christ, our Great High Priest, and we come to Him - but specifically the leaders of the church, they come, and they wait upon God, and they fast. Oh, it's handy if you believe that's something that used to be done, and you don't need to do it now - that's handy, isn't it? You can just eat your lunch and your fish supper, and not feel guilty about it - but there is fasting in the Bible. It shows desire, it shows how much we want God, it shows how concerned we are for His will.

When was the last time you heard of a group of leaders - maybe you've done it here - and when decisions had to be made, and you didn't know what to do, you weren't resting on human wisdom but you really wanted to know the will and the way of God, and you got together and said: 'We're going to pray, and we're going to fast, and we're going to seek God's face. Whatever He says to us we will do it, but we're going to wait on Him'? The Lord spoke, and the Lord says in verse 2: 'They ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, 'Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them'. Then, having fasted and prayed', again!, 'and laid hands on them, they sent them away. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit' - they weren't sent out by a board, or a denominational body, they were sent out by the Holy Spirit!

When God acts, and when He does His work His way, there will be unity in the Body, unity of purpose, unity of possessions - there will be nobody in need. 'If you see your brother in need and are not moved', John says, 'how dwells the love of God in you?'. There will be unity in prayer. I think really what I'm saying to you tonight is: what we see in the book of Acts is not established Christendom as this world knows it. I believe the Body of Christ is within established Christendom, but it's hardly recognisable to what we see here in the original plan. What we see in Acts is not organised religion, it is an organism of life! It is the very life of Christ! I would say to you tonight: don't look for the church institutionally, look for the church relationally, look for the church as it

relates to God as Heavenly Father, but look to the church as it relates to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ sharing this life of the risen Lord Jesus - our relationship with God and our relationship with people. That's the church! That's what the church was at the beginning, and that's what God - I believe - wants to restore. I believe the Lord wants a new Reformation in His church today!

Wayne Jacobsen says: 'No church model will produce God's life in you' - you can buy all the paperbacks you like in Christian bookshops about how to put bums on the pews, and increase your numbers to tens of thousands, mega-churches. You can do all you like, and I've been to some of them, and I tell you: it's not revival. 'No church model will produce God's life in you, it works the other way around' - remember this - 'our life in God, shared together, expresses itself as the church'. I don't believe you ever decide: 'Right, we're going to do church' - I don't believe that! I believe what you do is you get in relationship with God, and enjoy that life, and enjoy that life together, and church just happens! He goes on to say: 'It is the overflow of His life in us. You can tinker with church principles forever, and still miss out on what it means to live deeply in the Father's love and know how to share it with others'.

Do you know a basic definition of the church? It's God's people learning to share His life together. Is that what church does? Sharing the life of Christ together? Oh, that instead of trying to build a church (and I don't mean a building, I'm talking about the organisation), instead of trying to build a church, we would learn just to love one another, and share each other's journey and burden together - and, I tell you, church would happen in a way that we've not seen in centuries. When you talk about church in our land, what do people think about often? Meetings, the background I had, you know: 'You need to go to the meetings, you need to go to the meetings, the meetings, the meetings, the meetings'. If you need meetings to keep you close to the Lord - and I'm not against them - but if you need to be running seven nights a week to keep close to the Lord, there's something wrong, there's something wrong! That's not the life of God. Some of the early Christians were slaves, they weren't allowed to go to meetings. Oh, we need to come together, we need not to forsake the gathering of ourselves together, but we need to stop thinking of church as meetings, and start to think of it as family!

Listen to what Paul says in Ephesians 3: 'For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named' - we're a Family, we are a Body. I don't know what your creed is, or if you even say them or not, but I can say this one: I believe in the communion of the saints. Do you? Ach, you can believe in it all right, but that love for one another is to be manifest in unity. When God does His work His way, there is unity in the Body.

Let us pray. Now I want to just take time here - there are so many levels that this ministry can be applied on. There is a national level - and this might shock some of you, what I'm going to say, but I need to say it: I believe there is a day coming, at least God wants, the Lord Jesus' heart wants the time to come, when the labels even of Protestant and Catholic will fall away and there will be one Body in Christ, one Body in Christ. I don't mean the churches coming together in error - that's not what I'm talking about, that's not what I'm talking about - I'm talking about the relevancy of these terms that have, let's face it, lost their meaning, if they ever meant anything. We ought to ask ourselves as 'the Church', are we doing anything to block that, or to get in the way of it? We need to repent, and I know there's a lot of hurt going on all

through the years, and a lot of healing needed - but the only Prince of Peace is Jesus Christ. The only 'peace process' that is worth anything is the Gospel. The only answer for our divisions is the Church - not this church, that church, or the other church - the Church of Jesus Christ. That's the only answer. The indictment against us is: we have muddied the waters by our sectarianism and our dividedness. I believe that, and I believe we need to repent. You can pray for revival until the cows come home, but if you don't repent of your part that you have played in communicating hatred, bigotry, sectarianism to the world around - it's hypocrisy.

But then there is the local scene: denominations. I see it, and I'll just be honest with you - I hope you appreciate, even if you don't agree, you appreciate my honesty - I see it, and it's just competitiveness at times. Sometimes our doctrine is an idol - that's right! It becomes an idol: 'What I believe'. Then there is the local church, where there can be fighting in the ranks. I know of churches where there are pastors not speaking to one another, actually turning their chairs away from one another in public. How dwells the love of God? Maybe there is somebody in this gathering tonight, and you're not on speaking terms with them - I'm not here to condemn you, but the Lord has spoken to you tonight and you need to sort that out. You may not feel in the wrong, but you need to forgive them. I know your Minister has been preaching a series on forgiveness - maybe there is bitterness in your heart towards somebody here. You know, I know a little bit about revival history, and I know that some revivals broke out around the Lord's Table when one brother got up, and before he would break bread and drink from the cup, he confessed to his brother that he had bitterness in his heart and asked forgiveness - and revival broke out! Boys-a-dear, some circles I know of, if you missed the Lord's Table, it's nearly like the unpardonable sin. Jesus said: 'If you have aught against your brother, leave your gift at the altar and go and make right'. You'd be better not coming to church and sorting out the problems! We have everything wrong - not everything, but we have a lot wrong.

Is there someone here tonight who is man enough or woman enough to settle something tonight, to surrender an issue or controversy at the foot of the cross for the sake of the Gospel and the Kingdom of Christ, and the name of the Lord Jesus, and His reputation? This is heavy stuff, I know. You deal with God in the quietness of your heart, whatever the issues are. I want to ask something tonight, before we sing our final hymn: I would like this stillness that there is in the meeting just now to stay in this room. Even the musicians - if you don't mind, I hope I have the liberty to ask this - not to play just after the hymn. Allow this stillness that is the Presence of God, as people are dealing with God in their hearts - serious issues - allow that Presence just to linger and hover. You can fellowship outside and chat, and we want to make room for that, that's important - but we don't want to stifle in anyway what God is doing. Would you do that?

When God ACTS! - Chapter 5

"Missionary Expansion"

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If you haven't been here, well, where have you been for a start! But you've missed some of our studies that we've been doing in the book of Acts called "When God ACTS!", when God does His work His way. We started off on Sunday evening looking at how, when God does His work His way, 'The Gift Of The Holy Spirit Is Released' - and that has really been underpinning all that we have said, and has been the theme right throughout our studies so far: the power of the Holy Spirit, the actual resurrected Christ moving in His own Body, the Church, by the power and instrumentality of the Holy Spirit. That's the way things are meant to be today, they never were meant to be any other way. Then we looked on Monday evening at how, when God does His work His way, there is 'Boldness in Witness'. There is an effectiveness in our evangelism and our preaching, but also an opposition towards it when we're doing it correctly. Then we saw on Tuesday night that 'The Miraculous Is Displayed' when God does His work, and we saw last evening that also when God acts there is 'Unity in the Body' - and there was an awful lot of food for thought last night, wasn't there? I do trust that you've taken that to heart, and will pray through it. Tomorrow evening, in the will of the Lord, we'll be looking at how 'Convention Is Challenged' whenever God acts. I'll leave it there, come back to the next session.

Tonight we're looking at how, when God does His work His way, there is 'Missionary Expansion'. We're just going to look at chapter 1 verse 8 as a springboard verse, because we're going to be looking - as we have done - at many other scriptures in Acts and other portions. But we will read this verse that we have referred to numerous times already, the Lord Jesus in His resurrected form, just before He ascends, is telling the disciples of the promise of the Father, that they heard of Him, of the Holy Spirit coming, and He says in verse 8: *"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth"*.

Let us pray together. As I have invited you each night, I ask you to pray for yourself again. I don't know what your particular need is, but bring it to the Lord sincerely and with an open heart, and I believe He will speak to you tonight. Will you do that? Let's all together unite asking the Lord to meet with us: Father, we come to You in the mighty name of the Lord Jesus Christ. We thank You that there is a day coming, and we believe it's sooner than ever, when at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, every tongue confess Him as Lord, of things in heaven, and things on Earth, and things under the Earth - every tongue shall confess that He is Lord to Your glory, Father. We thank You that You have set Him above all principalities and powers, we thank You that You have put all things beneath His feet. We declare tonight, Father, that He is Lord of all, and He is the one and only Head of the church, and He is the only one to whose voice we must listen - He is the Commander of the Army of the Lord of Hosts, He is the Captain of our Salvation. Lord, we would look to Headquarters in Heaven tonight, that Your will would be done on Earth as it is in Heaven. We want Heaven and Earth to combine this evening, we want Earth and Heaven to agree - oh, that You

would come tonight, Lord, and open the windows of Heaven upon us, and pour out that mighty unction that the early church got that made them such an indomitable force on the face of this Earth. So come, Lord, we ask that You will break the bondages in our lives that prevent us moving out as we ought to in the Spirit. Whatever the enemy has on us Lord, break his power tonight, we pray. We pray that You will release people and deliver them from the power of the enemy this evening. We take authority in Jesus' name, and by the blood of the Lamb, over the forces of darkness even at work in this place - we bind you in Jesus' name. We pray, Heavenly Father, that through the power of the cross, that You will deliver people and transform lives tonight, as we look to You now in Jesus' name. Amen.

The result of the Holy Spirit being released at Pentecost, and standing in that great, mighty torrent of the river of God that has flowed ever since then, taking it as our own personally - as we saw, it's not enough that the Spirit came, we must ourselves, individually, enter into that experience of knowing Pentecost - but when that does happen, we will immediately become missionary minded: 'For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son'. As someone once put it: God had only one Son, and He made Him a Missionary. Henry Martyn, the 19th-century missionary to India and Persia, said: 'The Spirit of Christ is the spirit of missions, and the nearer we get to Him the more intensely missionary minded we must become'.

You don't need to look too far in the book of Acts to see that the heart of God is a heart that is for missions. In chapter 8 you have the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch. What you may not be aware of is that the Ethiopian eunuch was a son of Ham - you remember the three sons of Noah? Ham, Shem and Japheth, and after the flood it was through those three sons that God populated, or repopulated, the Earth. The Ethiopian eunuch is a son of Ham. Then when we come to chapter 9, you get Saul of Tarsus, who becomes the great Paul the apostle, and he's a son of Shem. When we go to chapter 10, we get Cornelius, who is effectively the first Gentile that comes to faith in Christ - he is a son of Japheth. So what God is showing us here is His mind and His heart: He loves the world of sinners lost and ruined by the fall. He desires that all men everywhere should repent, and come to a knowledge of the truth. Right away in these three chapters - 8, 9 and 10 - we have an ethnic cross-section of humanity. I don't know whether it's politically correct any more, but we used to sing in Sunday School: 'Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in His sight, Jesus loves the little children of the world'. Isn't it wonderful that that's the Gospel that we have to proclaim?

Not only is it such in the sense of ethnicity, but also in relation to class. When you look at chapter 16 of Acts, you will see three individuals who, I believe, come to the Lord Jesus. The first is Lydia, who is a seller of purple, a businesswoman, and she is from the upper-class. She was in this trade which was very lucrative, the dyeing of garments in purple, she was from the upper-class, the top rung of the ladder. Then we meet a jailer, remember Paul and Silas were in jail, and there was a great earthquake and they were freed - and this jailer is going to take his own life, because he doesn't know what to do. He wants to be saved, and they tell him: 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved' - some of you maybe need to hear that tonight. He was saved, and all his house were saved, and they were all baptised and brought into the fellowship of God's people - now he was in the middle class, a jailer. Then in chapter 16 we get a girl, a slave girl, who was possessed with a spirit of divination or fortune-telling. She was delivered by Paul, and I don't believe he delivered her just to let her

become prey to more demons, I believe that she came to Christ. It's not explicitly stated, but it's inferred. She was of the very lowest rung of the class ladder, the bottom end of the social scale.

All of this is telling us - whether it's ethnicity, or class, culture, or creed - God, the God of heaven, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is no respecter of persons. This has been His plan of the ages, right from the fall of man: that He should redeem a people from every cross-section of humanity - that's why Christ came into this world, that's why He shed His precious blood and died, that's why He was buried and He rose again the third day, that's why He ascended to heaven and poured out the Holy Spirit. Incidentally, that's why He's going to return. We read in Revelation chapter 5:9: 'They sang a new song, saying: 'You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation''.

The early Moravians, that great pioneer missionary movement in modern times - not for us, but in world history - very small in number, and yet they really made a mighty dent upon the world in extending the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. When they were going to the mission field, they were going to die. They were never coming home on furlough, they weren't going to meet their family again. As they were being let loose into the ocean to sail away, as they watched their loved ones disappear for the last time, they cried from the depths of their soul: 'Let the slain Lamb receive the reward of His sacrifice'. I get a tingle up my back when I say that - it's what it's all about: that Jesus would see the travail of His soul and be satisfied. There is an old hymn, I think it's in the Redemption Hymn Book, and it goes like this - you picture it in your mind:

'Coming, coming, yes they are,
Coming, coming from afar,

From the wild and scorching desert,
Afric's sons awaked from sleep;
Jesus' love has drawn and won them,
At His cross they bow and weep.

Coming, coming, yes they are,
Coming, coming from afar,

From the fields and crowded cities,
China gathers to His feet;
In His love Shem's gentle children,
Now have found a safe retreat.

Coming, coming, yes they are,
Coming, coming from afar,

From the Indus, and the Ganges,
Steady flows the living stream,
To love's ocean, to His bosom,
Calvary their wond'ring theme.

Coming, coming, yes they are,

Coming, coming from afar,

From the steppes of Russia dreary,
From Slavonia's scattered lands,
They are yielding soul and spirit
Into Jesus' loving hands'.

What a sight! Yet this sight, this vision, was born in the heart of God - for He so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. We have seen already that the promise of the power of the Spirit was to be given as we go with the Gospel. It's as we go that the promise is fulfilled. We looked at the Great Commission one evening, Matthew 28 verses 18-20: 'Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature, making disciples, baptising in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, teaching them to do all things that I have taught you to do; and lo, I am with you always' - but it's as you go. We saw that great complementary commission in Mark 16, the very last verse, which is almost like a summary of the Acts of the Apostles, verse 20 of Mark 16: 'And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs'. But the miraculous, the supernatural demonstration and attestation that God gives to the Gospel of Jesus Christ was conditional to a certain extent upon their going.

I think it was two nights ago, we saw that there were about 40 miracles in the book of Acts, and 39 of them took place in the marketplace. The effect of the Holy Spirit coming to that Upper Room on the Day of Pentecost, was to flush the disciples out into the street, into the world as witnesses: 'When the Holy Spirit is come upon you, you shall be witnesses unto Me'. A.J. Gordon, who had a great missionary heart, said: 'Whenever, in any century, whether in a single heart or a company of believers, there has been a fresh effusion of the Spirit, there has followed inevitably a fresh endeavour in the work of evangelising the world' - the two come together. Here's another good test of any claim to revival - now and again we hear of apparent revivals across the world - one good test is: is the Gospel central to it? Is the Gospel central to it? Is the Gospel even being preached? Are souls being saved? Does this revival, or this supposed move of God, drive Christians to win the lost and to go to the four corners of the world with the message?

You see, that's God's heart - and God's intention is always to spread the Gospel. That was even His intent through the persecution that the early believers endured. If you look at chapter 8 and you look at verse 4, it says: 'Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word'. Even through the persecution, the heart of God was being fulfilled, and people were hearing the Good News and coming to Christ. Now listen, as we said on our first evening: the book of Acts is not just a history, it is teaching us something about what authentic Christianity is, and what Christianity ought to be today. What it teaches us, as we look at missionary expansion, is: when the church is moving under the anointing of the Spirit, missions will be at the forefront of her consciousness. The heart of God will be the church's heart.

So, in the Acts, we see that the Head of the church - in the book of Revelation chapter 1 verse 7, we have a vision of the resurrected Lord Jesus, and we have a sight of the Throne of God. Before the Throne of God are seven Spirits, speaking of the perfect, complete, Holy Spirit - but because they are before the Throne, that speaks of

administration of the King. Then we have a quick glimpse of the Lord Jesus Christ as the Head of the church, moving among the candlesticks - that's the churches - and that means He is administrating His rule as the Head of the church, via the instrumentality of the Holy Spirit. There is no in between, there is no middle body or board - it's Christ and His church. In Acts we see Him moving and giving directives as the Head.

Do you know that the early church were directed where to preach the Gospel? If you look at Acts 8 here and verse 29, we read: 'Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go near and overtake this chariot''. We just read these things and we don't even look to the depth of the meaning that is there - the Holy Spirit was directing Philip where to preach. If you look at chapter 10 in relation to Cornelius, he was seeking God and Peter was instructed to go and preach words to him whereby he would be saved - verse 19: 'While Peter thought about the vision, the Spirit said to him, 'Behold, three men are seeking you. Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them''. Clearly the Head of the church, the Lord Jesus, through the Holy Spirit's administration, is directing where to preach.

The Holy Spirit didn't just direct where to preach, He directed where not to preach. Have you ever seen this? If you look at Acts 16 verse 6: 'Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them'. So in early Christianity, they heard from Headquarters where to preach, where not to preach, but also it was the Lord who ordained who should preach and who should lead the church. It was the Lord who gave the word on that. If you look at chapter 13, we were there the other evening, we see in verse 2: 'As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, 'Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them'', they laid hands on them and separated them, and verse 4 says, 'So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit' - it was the Holy Spirit who decided! The Head of the church - Jesus Christ, through His Vicar on Earth, the Holy Spirit, His representative on Earth - dictated and directed who preached, where they preached, and where they shouldn't preach, and who led the church as well.

In chapter 20 you see this, the elders who were in Ephesus - I hope you're not offended by me saying this, but they weren't elders through a two thirds majority, or whatever way it works in some places - they were elders through the leading and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Chapter 20 verse 28: 'Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers' - the Holy Spirit made them overseers - 'to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood'. Now you say: 'Ach, but that's all pie-in-the-sky, you know, that's all subjective and very nebulous - you've got to get a handle on these things, how does this practically out work in everyday life?'. Well, I'll tell you how it did in the early church: they got on their face before God, and they fasted and they prayed, and they sought the Lord, and sought the Spirit's direction - and they didn't do anything unless they had His say-so.

Paul was directed to Macedonia to preach the Gospel through a dream, look at chapter 16 and verse 9: 'A vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us''. When Paul went to Corinth, I think he was a bit afraid, it was a rough time that he had there, and he was

maybe wondering should he stay at all, the opposition was so great. In verse 9 of chapter 18 it says: 'The Lord spoke to Paul in the night by 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''.

Now, why am I sharing all this with you? To show you that the early church was Spirit-led! It certainly was not people-driven, neither was it directed by a top-heavy hierarchy who threw their weight around, but they were directed by Heaven sharing its burden as the early disciples waited on God, and sought His mind and heart. Now, we need to get back to that - and when we do hear the heartbeat of God, we will find that it is missionary: the heart cry of God is to reach the world!

Now let me show you this specifically in more detail. Turn to chapter 8 - we've already been there, but we will look at this in more detail - verse 4, we've read it already: 'Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word. Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them. And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did'. Look at the things that were going on: 'For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed. And there was great joy in that city' - is there any wonder? Subsequently the Samaritans received the Spirit, we saw that on Sunday evening - verses 14 to 17. Then look at what happens - that's what we would call a revival or an awakening, and that's wonderful - I imagine if it was us, we would probably found a church, we would create a ministry of some kind, and we would settle down there for the rest of our lives just gleaning in the benefits of the outpouring of the Spirit there in Samaria. Am I wrong? We would write books about it, and take tours and hold conferences about it - how to have this happen in your church.

But, you see, because Philip's ear was toward heaven something very unusual happened - verse 26: 'The angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, 'Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza'. This is desert. So he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship, was returning. And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet. Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go near and overtake this chariot'. So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, 'Do you understand what you are reading?'. And he said, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?'. And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him. The place in the Scripture which he read was this: 'He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so He opened not His mouth. In His humiliation His justice was taken away, and who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth'. So the eunuch answered Philip and said, 'I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?'. Then Philip opened his mouth, I love this verse, 'and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him. Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, 'See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?'. Then Philip said, 'If you believe with all your heart, you may'. And he answered and said, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God'. So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away' - do you see this? Do you see the logistics here? 'The Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away so that the eunuch saw him no

more; and he went on his way rejoicing. But Philip was found at Azotus. And passing through, he preached in all the cities till he came to Caesarea'.

Do you see what happens here? There was an awakening in Samaria, where we would probably bed down for the rest of our days - but because Philip had the ear of Heaven, he heard the voice of the Spirit, and he went to one man in a desert, mark. This man was an Ethiopian, an official in the government of Candace, the Queen of the Ethiopians, and he was converted wonderfully by God's grace - and this is what happened, this is the backstory that you don't maybe know about: that eunuch took the Gospel back to Ethiopia, and effectively to Northern Africa, which very soon after became a centre of world Christianity particularly in Alexandria in Egypt. What if Philip had said: 'That couldn't be the voice of God, He wouldn't take me away from all this blessing just to the middle of nowhere' - he didn't know there was a man sitting in his chariot reading Isaiah, he didn't even know there was one man. If I had known there was one man, I would have said: 'Lord, one over there, or all these thousands of people getting delivered and healed here, Lord?'. But he went because the Lord spoke, and he recognised His voice: 'My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow me' - and because of that, look at what happened to Africa! It's amazing, isn't it?

In Acts 9, God arrests Saul of Tarsus - who was, arguably, the greatest persecutor of The Way and of the Lord Jesus Christ in His living Body, the Church - and the grace of God, and the risen Lord Jesus Christ appearing to him, turned this greatest persecutor of the faith to the greatest propagator and preacher of the Gospel that the world has probably ever known. What a wonderful story. A man, remember we saw him, he's just 'a certain disciple', that his rank, he's nobody special - well, he is special, we are all special, there is no rank anyway - but he wasn't an apostle, he's just called 'a certain disciple, Ananias'. He was commanded of the Lord to go and help Saul, to lay hands on him to heal him, to get him filled with the Spirit, to baptise him, and to disciple him - and he objects to going to Saul, and I mean who of us wouldn't? Here was the exterminator of Christians, and he hears God's voice saying: 'Now, I want you to go down to that fellow and speak to him' - and he starts to object, as any of us naturally would do, because this man was such a danger to Christians. Look at what the Lord said in verse 15 of chapter 9, the Lord said to Ananias: 'Go, for he', that is Saul, 'is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake'. We saw, I think, on Tuesday night from 2 Corinthians 11, that great list of things that Paul did suffer for the sake of the Lord Jesus' name - but what a vessel Paul would become for the carrying of the Gospel.

As I said to you, the majority of this book of Acts is about Paul, and I referred to the fact that it might actually be a treatise for his defence to Theophilus, who may have been an attorney who was representing him before Caesar at Rome. But what we see, in the latter part particularly of this book, is the missionary journeys of Paul - four missionary journeys to the known world. In Acts 13 and 14, the first journey to Cyprus and Asia Minor. In Acts 15-18, his second journey to Macedonia and Greece. In Acts 18 through to 21, we get his third missionary journey to Galatia, to Ephesus and Macedonia. In Acts 27 and 28, his fourth missionary journey to Malta and Rome. Do you see what God was doing through this vessel, Paul, who did not count his life dear to him, but all he lived for was to see the Gospel take hold across the whole known world like a mighty, mighty rushing torrent. But you also see beyond Paul to see the

divine strategy. Many of these places that Paul visited were centres of culture, they were business centres, they were trade routes, where the people who were being converted were able to influence those who were sojourning, passing by and through - and so the whole known world and the Empire were being mightily impacted by the Gospel expansion.

Now let me just cast your mind back for a moment or two to where we were at the start in chapter 1, in this Upper Room, and cowardly disciples for fear of their lives meeting together - but the wind and the fire came, and the power of Pentecost was outpoured, and this irresistible, uncontrollable, unpredictable power of the Spirit took hold of these disciples and spread! F.F. Bruce entitled his book detailing the rise and progress of Christianity from its first beginnings: 'The Spreading Flame', because that's exactly what it was! Primitive Christianity did not spread quietly or slowly like a creeper up a wall, but it swept over vast territories like a raging, mighty furnace - because they went in the power of God's Spirit. When God does His work His way, when there is a release of the Spirit and there is bold witness, and when the Body is united, there will be missionary expansion.

But I've got to ask a couple of questions, because we're not wanting to learn about how things were done 2000 years ago, we are wanting to know what God's mind is for us today - and it is this very same thing, but questions need to be asked. Where now is the emphasis on soul winning in the church? We have become practical atheists with regard to the issue of people's souls being lost, and there actually being a real, living hell - we believe it doctrinally, but practically we don't walk in these everyday realities. Our Christian lives would be so different if it were the case! Another question is: where is the emphasis on world missions in the church today, the modern church? Am I wrong in believing that we have lost the vision, the original vision that came from the heart of God to the early apostles that was the reason why the Holy Spirit was outpoured, that the Holy Spirit would be poured out upon all flesh, right across the globe? The Bible says: 'Without a vision, the people perish'.

Today, 9 out of every 10 people in the world are lost - 9 out of every 10 are lost! Six out of that 9 have never heard a clear presentation of the Gospel. Of those 6 who have never heard, 3 have no one to tell them. Two thousand years from the death and resurrection of Christ, His ascension and the coming of the Spirit, this is where we are! Here's a question for you, a bit of a conundrum: what is 750,000 miles long, reaches around the Earth 30 times, and grows 20 miles longer each day? The answer is: it's the line of people who are without Christ. A.B. Simpson said:

'A hundred thousand souls a day
Are passing one by one away
In Christ-less guilt and gloom;
Without one ray of hope or light,
With future dark as endless night,
They're passing to their doom'.

Is it anything to you, to me? In our modern, materialistic ease and Western comfort, does it affect us any more? Don Curry served in the Sindh Desert region of Pakistan with the Bible and Medical Missionary Fellowship in recent days. He is a physician and had a keen interest in community health, but also in tribal evangelism, and going into places where the Gospel had not been preached before - not laying on another man's

foundation. With his wife Nancy, he visited a village of animists - that's people who worship their ancestors, and false gods, pagans - and he told them the story of Jesus. They were intrigued with Christ's teaching, particularly about love and forgiveness - they were deeply moved by the compassionate ministry of the Lord Jesus. He reported that they were stirred at the mention of the death and resurrection of Christ. Then along the way someone asked: 'Don, when did all this happen? 10 or 15 years ago?'. Don replied: 'No, it took place almost 2000 years ago'. Saddened, the man asked - listen: 'What terrible thing have we done? What terrible thing have we done that God should have kept this wonderful story from us for so long?'. It wasn't God did it, was it? Did God keep the Good News from these people?

The evangelical church of the United States are perhaps the wealthiest group of Christians in human history. There are now about 37,000 career foreign missionaries that have come out of the United States - now, think of the population of the States, and the Christian population of the States - 37,000 career missionaries, and about 9000 of those missionaries are engaged in full-time evangelism. Not all of these missionaries are preaching the Gospel, only about 9000 say that they are preaching the Gospel. Robertson McQuilkin, in his book 'The Great Omission', says this of those figures: 'The truth is, less than 1% of full-time Christian workers are engaged in evangelistic ministry among the unevangelised of the world'. He asks the question: is this the way the Commander in Chief would assign His troops, or is someone not listening?

Are you listening? I'll be honest, it's not a call that too many of us warm to listen to, that God might send us somewhere. I think it was Keith Green wrote that song: 'We shouldn't be praying whether we should go, we should be praying whether we should stay' - because the commission is 'Go!' But you might be sitting here tonight and saying: 'But I have never felt any compelling call' - well, are you sure you are within calling distance? If the Lord did call you, could you hear Him, are you listening for Him? Or are your ears clogged up with all sorts of things from this world? That's what Jesus said in the parable of the seed and the sower, that the word of the Lord, the seed gets choked by the weeds of this world that choke the life of God in us - the love of money, the love of other things kills the seed of the word, and so we don't become fruitful. Are you within calling distance of hearing the Macedonian call that Paul heard in a dream: 'Come over and help us! Come over and help us! We need you!'?

Are you sure you're not called? Is there someone here tonight and you have been called, and you have been disobedient to that call? You have reneged on it, you have tried to drown it, you have ignored it, you've got involved in other things to try and salve your conscience over it, but you know God's call has been in your life and you haven't answered it. It's never too late, it's never too late. Maybe you're a young person and you sense - and there's a lot of young people, and I believe the new thing that God is doing is among young people. They are fed up with the superficiality, they're fed up with dead legalism, but they're also fed up with shallow modernism - they want depth, they want reality, they hunger after the real thing. Some of you tonight could have the call of God on your life, and He's bringing it into focus this evening. You are right, He is calling you.

But maybe you're here and you say: 'Well, I really can't go, and I'm not called'. Well, it is true, not all can go - but in some respects, in our modern age, something has shifted a little; because there are parts of our modern world that don't really need

more workers. Now don't misunderstand me, I'm not wanting to cool you down if you really have a passion to go for the Lord - but what I'm getting at is: what certain parts of the world needs is more money. Some of you here might remember World War II, and Winston Churchill pleaded with the Americans - he was looking for their support - and over the radio there was a broadcast, and in his own inimitable way he said: 'Give us the tools and we will finish the job'. There are parts, particularly of the Third World, tonight that are crying out to us in the West as Christians, and they're saying: 'Give us the tools and we will finish the job!'. The great tragedy is that there are plenty of willing labourers tonight in Asia, in parts of Africa, but they just don't have the resources! They're not looking you to pack your bags and go over, they're wanting you to put your hand in your pocket and give them the tools to finish the job!

If I could recommend a book to you tonight - and there are many - but in relation to missions it would be K.P. Yohannan's book, he is the founder of Gospel for Asia, and his book is called 'Revolution in World Missions'. It's not a very catchy title, but it's a wonderful book. I got it because it was free - you know when you're on a website, and something pops up and says 'free book', well, Christians will go for the free book! I went for this book, and boy is it worth getting - and you might even get it free. Really he has a vision from the Lord: why is the Western church so rich? His vision is that the Western church is rich in order to fund the Gospel to the poor, particularly in Asia - specifically financing indigenous workers, national people who are literally queueing up to take the Gospel, but they don't have the resources.

In that book I read of evangelists who haven't enough food to feed their children. I read of an evangelist who went into a tribal area where the people were illiterate, so he couldn't give them the Bible, he couldn't give them Gospel tracts, so he decided he would show slides - but he hadn't got a projector, a slide projector, and he couldn't afford one. So what did he do? He went to his local hospital every week, and he sold his blood to buy a projector to share the Gospel. He sold his blood. What would you do? What are you doing? Where is your money going?

An elderly missionary, a lady who had been in Africa for 50 years without one furlough, was interviewed upon returning home. Her interviewer asked her: 'Is it true that after 50 years of service, you only saw one soul who was saved? How do you feel about that now that you're home? Was it worth it?'. The elderly saint's answer was just profound, this was what she said: 'I would do 100 more for one more soul'. You see, that saint understood the value of a soul:

'O teach me what it meaneth,
O teach me what it cost Thee
To make a sinner whole;
And teach me, Saviour, teach me
The value of one soul!'

James, isn't it James says, one soul converted will save a soul from death and cover over a multitude of sins - one soul! Fifty years and one soul! David Pawson says the Gospel will not save anyone by being preserved, it must be propagated and only then will it achieve its potential. When the Holy Spirit comes in mighty, awakening power - as it happened originally in Acts, and as I believe God wants it to happen again today in a modern generation - there will be missionary expansion, and the heart of God will start to deepen in the heart of His people. Charles Peace was executed - he was on

death row in the United States for many, many heinous crimes - and as he was being walked down the green line, there was a clergy man who was in front of him or behind him reading some liturgy. He talked about the awful dreadful day of God's wrath, and the need for repentance. Charles Peace, remember minutes away from his own death, this ungodly man turned round to the clergy man and said: 'Do you believe that?'. He said: 'If I believed what you say you believe, I would crawl on my knees and my elbows across broken glass to the four corners of the world to warn people'. He went to a Christ-less eternity, as far as we know.

I hardly knew whether to share this story with you or not - but it was Charles Swindoll told it, so it wasn't meant for Magherafelt or Union Road. A famous artist was once commissioned to paint a picture of a dying church. It was expected that he would paint a small humble congregation in a dilapidated building, but instead he painted a stately edifice with a rich pulpit, and a magnificent series of windows. Near the door, you could hardly see it in the painting, but near the door there was an offering box marked 'Mission' - and very delicately he had painted over the contributions slot, cobwebs. That was his image of a dying church. There is a modern song by Don Moen that goes like this - and, oh that this would be all our prayers tonight:

'Father of Creation, unfold Your sovereign plan:
Raise up a chosen generation
That will march through the land.
All of creation is longing
For Your unveiling of power;
Would You release Your anointing,
Oh God, let this be the hour!

Let Your glory fall in this room,
Let it go forth from here to the nations.
Let Your fragrance rest in this place,
As we gather to seek Your face'.

Verse 2:

'Ruler of the nations, the world has yet to see
The full release of Your promise,
The church in victory!
Turn to us, Lord, and touch us,
Make us strong in Your might.
Overcome our weakness
That we could stand up and fight!

Let Your glory fall in this room,
Let it go forth from here to the nations.
Let Your fragrance rest in this place,
As we gather to seek Your face'.

Let us pray. O, there is such a heavy sense of God's Presence - I hope you sense it, I hope that you're not too deadened that you can't perceive the stillness, like the dew upon the tender herb, like the summer rain upon the flower. The Lord has come down, He has been strangely near these nights - but I sense Him very near this evening. I'm

not going to play about: is there anyone here that's not converted, not born again? Though I have not been preaching the Gospel, you have sensed God and you're under conviction, and you need to get right with the Saviour - you're lost and you're heading for hell if you're not saved. Do you want to be saved tonight? Is there anyone in the meeting tonight who wants to be saved? Is there anyone who will acknowledge their need of Christ, just where they are seated, by raising a hand? Heads are bowed and eyes are closed - is there anyone, young or old, here tonight that will say: 'Tonight, I want to be right with God, I want to know my sins forgiven, peace with heaven. I want to know I'm on my way to an eternity with Jesus, and not be lost forever'. I'm not going to prolong this, but is there anyone here that will say tonight: 'I want to get saved', and we will help you and pray with you now. Just raise your hand where you are. Is there anyone? Just raise your hand, young or old, I'll see it, raise it quickly and we will pray for you.

Is there a backslider, and you know you're not where you should be with the Lord? You've walked away from discipleship, you think it's just enough to have a profession years ago that is long past its sell by date, and doesn't seem to measure up to much today? Is there anyone who says: 'I'm coming home tonight, I realise the seriousness of why Jesus died for me - it's not to sit on a pew warming it, it's to do something for the extension of the Kingdom'? Is there anyone who is a backslider tonight, whether you're in the world or not, but you're cold and you're dead - is there anyone who will say: 'I'm coming home tonight'? Is there anyone who will raise their hand to say: 'I'm coming back to the Lord tonight, I'm rededicated my life to Him, I'm confessing my sins and getting right with Him' - is there anyone tonight? Just raise your hand quickly and put it down, and we will see it, and we will pray for you and with you.

Is there anyone who has the call of God upon their life, and you've sensed it for some time - maybe you have reneged on it, or maybe it's becoming new to you, the first you've ever sensed it, and it's growing stronger. You realise tonight that God has spoken to you - now don't play games with God, if God is not speaking to you, don't respond. I'm not looking for people to respond for the sake of responding, I'd rather you didn't respond, as made a vow to God and didn't pay it. Does anyone here tonight sense the call of God, not just to go deeper - and you need that filling of the Holy Spirit. One old pioneer missionary sent a letter to those who were sending help to the field, and he said: 'For God's sake, stop sending me men that are not baptised and filled with the Holy Spirit!'. So you need to get that power from God, but He will empower you if you come by faith and you go in obedience. Is there anyone here tonight that will say: 'I have heard the call, and like Isaiah 'Here I am, send me''? God bless you, God bless you - may you be a Mary Slessor or an Amy Wilson Carmichael, God bless you. Is there anyone else? Is there anyone else who will say: 'Here am I, I will go'? Is there anyone else?

Now, if you want to get saved tonight, and you didn't raise your hand, or you want to come back to the Lord, just pray with me this prayer and mean it: 'O God, I come to You in the name of Your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. I confess my sin, and I repent of it, turning from it and turning to You - and I ask You to cleanse me in the Blood of Jesus. I ask You to save me because He died for me, and rose again for me, and I confess Him as Lord of my life. I surrender all that I am to Him, I renounce Satan and all his works, and I ask You to fill me with Your Holy Spirit'. If you're a backslider, pray something similar, confess your sins, repent of them, come to Calvary, renounce Satan and all his works, surrender to the Lordship of Jesus - all that you are and all that you

have - and ask Him to fill you with the Holy Spirit, and He will.

There are great personal issues in the balance: people's lives, their futures, eternal ramifications in souls and destiny - 8 billion souls tonight, 8 billion living, never dying souls. O Lord have mercy, have mercy on me, let me not preach and not be willing myself to do anything that You tell me, Lord. I know that I would be frightened out of my wits, but Lord we do believe that You always equip whenever You command. O Lord, I pray tonight that Your glory fall on this place, and let us go forth from here to the nations. Those of us who don't go, may we dig deep in our pockets and give to those who will go, but can't go because they don't have the tools. Lord, we pray for our brothers and sisters in lands who are being persecuted tonight; those in prison; those who, for their bold witness, are suffering for the name - be with them tonight, be with them Lord, give great grace and mercy to them. But help us to ask ourselves: how can we wash their feet? How can we minister to them? O Lord, let Your fragrance remain upon us now - and for our final night tomorrow, Lord, come ahead of us and be here to meet us. Thanking You for Your sweet presence, in Jesus' name, Amen.

When God ACTS! - Chapter 6

"Convention Is Challenged"

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by David Legge

We're turning in our Bibles tonight to Acts chapter 10 - well, we've covered a lot, haven't we, these nights? We've been looking at the book of Acts - "When God ACTS!" has been our title, what happens when God does His work His way. On Sunday evening we embarked on that by looking at how, when God does His work, He releases the Holy Spirit. On Monday night we looked at how there will be 'Boldness in Witness', the church will witness boldly to the saving work of Christ when God is at work. Then we saw on Tuesday that 'The Miraculous Is Displayed' when God is doing His work, and we saw on Wednesday that there will be 'Unity in the Body', in the church of Jesus. Last night we saw that there will be 'Missionary Expansion' - whenever God is doing a new thing among His people, there is always a missionary endeavour, and a new vision to reach the four corners of the world with the good news of the Gospel.

Tonight is: when God does His work His way 'Convention Is Challenged' - that might seem an unusual one to you, but I believe it is central to everything God does, and especially when He is doing a new thing - convention is challenged. We will see this tonight from Acts chapter 10 - it's quite a lengthy reading, but we make no apology for reading God's word together. Verse 1, reading the whole chapter, and a couple of verses into chapter 11: *"There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment, a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always. About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, 'Cornelius!'. And when he observed him, he was afraid, and said, 'What is it, lord?' So he said to him, 'Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa, and send for Simon whose surname is Peter. He is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea. He will tell you what you must do'. And when the angel who spoke to him had departed, Cornelius called two of his household servants and a devout soldier from among those who waited on him continually. So when he had explained all these things to them, he sent them to Joppa. The next day, as they went on their journey and drew near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour. Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. In it were all kinds of fourfooted animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. And a voice came to him, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat'. But Peter said, 'Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean'. And a voice spoke to him again the second time, 'What God has cleansed you must not call common'. This was done three times. And the object was taken up into heaven again. Now while Peter wondered within himself what this vision which he had seen meant, behold, the men who had been sent from Cornelius had made inquiry for Simon's house, and stood before the gate. And they called and asked whether Simon, whose surname was Peter, was lodging there. While Peter thought about the vision, the Spirit said to him, 'Behold, three men are seeking*

you. Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them'. Then Peter went down to the men who had been sent to him from Cornelius, and said, 'Yes, I am he whom you seek. For what reason have you come?'. And they said, 'Cornelius the centurion, a just man, one who fears God and has a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews, was divinely instructed by a holy angel to summon you to his house, and to hear words from you'. Then he invited them in and lodged them. On the next day Peter went away with them, and some brethren from Joppa accompanied him. And the following day they entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter lifted him up, saying, 'Stand up; I myself am also a man'. And as he talked with him, he went in and found many who had come together. Then he said to them, 'You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean'" - what a statement! "Therefore I came without objection as soon as I was sent for. I ask, then, for what reason have you sent for me?'. So Cornelius said, 'Four days ago I was fasting until this hour; and at the ninth hour I prayed in my house, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing, and said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your alms are remembered in the sight of God. Send therefore to Joppa and call Simon here, whose surname is Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea. When he comes, he will speak to you'. So I sent to you immediately, and you have done well to come. Now therefore, we are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God'. Then Peter opened his mouth and said: 'In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him. The word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ; He is Lord of all; that word you know, which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, and began from Galilee after the baptism which John preached: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him'" - that is the ministry of Jesus, under the anointing of the Holy Spirit, summed up in one sentence. "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him'" - brilliant! "And we are witnesses of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they killed by hanging on a tree. Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly, not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before by God, even to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead. To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission'", or forgiveness, "'of sins'. While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word. And those of the circumcision", that is, the Jews, "who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God. Then Peter answered, 'Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?'. And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then they asked him to stay a few days".

Now, just a few verses of chapter 11, verse 1: "Now the apostles and brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision", the Jews, "contended with

him, saying, 'You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!'. But Peter explained it to them in order from the beginning, saying..." - and then he recounts what we've just read. Look at the reaction in verse 18, after he has retold the story that we have been given account of tonight, verse 18: 'When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, 'Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life!'. Amen.

Let's pray together briefly, and I will ask you again tonight to pray for yourself that God might speak to you. I believe God has been speaking very definitely in these meetings, He has certainly been speaking to my heart, and I believe that there is a revelation from the Father heart tonight to the church and the folk gathered here, and even the church at large. I don't know who will be listening to this recording, but I believe there is a message for our land tonight - and it's important that you have a heart to receive. I don't know what your state is, you mightn't even be converted, you might be a backslider, you might be a cold Christian - but come to the Lord, would you do that? Say right away: 'Lord, please speak to me, let me hear Your voice tonight'.

Abba Father, we bless Your holy name, Your thrice holy name. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, we come into Your presence in prayer. Lord, we bless You that You are the Holy God of Heaven, You have become our Father through our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank You for the Spirit of your Son that rises up within us crying, 'Abba Father!'. We thank You that we have no longer a spirit of bondage to fear, but the Spirit of your Son that cries 'Abba!'. Lord, may we all in this place tonight know what it is to have the remission of sins. Those who are oppressed by the devil tonight, in the name of Jesus we pray that they will be released and delivered and transformed - sins forgiven would be theirs, they would know what it is to be emancipated from the shackles of the evil one. But Lord, all of us need a touch from Yourself tonight, we all need You to come and really take a dealing with us, and do divine surgery in the depths of our hearts this evening. Lord, challenge convention in our lives, challenge convention in the church, in this church, in every church, in the church in Northern Ireland, the church in the island of Ireland, the church of the United Kingdom, the church in Western Europe - oh Lord, we pray, according to Your word, that You would pour out Your Spirit upon all flesh. So come to us tonight, we take authority in the name of the Lord Jesus over those forces that would seek to thwart the power and the work of the Holy Spirit and the Kingdom of God. We rebuke them, we say: 'The Lord rebuke you in Jesus' name'. We bind you and say: 'You have no authority here'. We ask, our Father tonight, that the full power of the Gospel would be dispensed to us, and we would see what it is as it was in the book of Acts for signs to follow the preaching of the word - Lord, that this meeting would be different tonight, and that You would do something that would have lasting effect in the annals of eternity, not for anyone's glory, but our Lord Jesus Christ - in whose name we pray. Amen.

What is often overlooked by Christians, modern day Christians, is that the first Christians were Jewish - you do know that? The first church was Jewish, and at the beginning it was assumed that the special character of the Jewish ceremonies and their identity as Jews would continue. The sect of 'The Way', early Christianity, was seen to be a Jewish society. Of course Jesus was a Jew, and He is the Jewish Messiah. The Gospel was to be preached to the Jew first, for salvation is of the Jews - Jesus said that. So when the Gentiles got born again, and got filled with the Holy Spirit, this idea of the essential Jewish character of the church was challenged. This was a new thing to

the Jewish psyche, the Hebrew mind - it challenged convention. We're going to see tonight - and I believe if you have any experience of God working in your life, you will know - that the status quo has to go. You will know that God comes, and He challenges many things that we feel are concrete and immovable in our lives. We've been praying in these prayer meetings: 'Oh, that You would rend the heavens, and You would come down' - that's what Isaiah prayed, that the mountains might flow at Your presence. The mountains are those insurmountable obstacles that seem to have been there forever, but when God comes things that have been eternal obstacles have to melt and have to move.

So, when the Gentiles, the non-Jews, started to convert there were questions being asked by the Jews. Such as: must these Gentiles become Jews? Must they observe Judaism? Must they be circumcised? Must they celebrate the rites, the rituals, the feasts of Judaism? Then another difficult question, a hot potato, was: how should Jews relate to these Gentiles - because the Jews had very strict laws, social and dietary laws for instance, even about who they could eat with. So if these people were coming to Christ, and the Holy Spirit was falling upon them like the Holy Spirit did upon the Jews at Pentecost, how do they relate to them?

So God had to speak, and God did speak. As we read tonight from Acts 10, God spoke to the apostle Peter as he was on the top of a house in Joppa praying, and he got a vision. He got this vision of a big sheet that dropped down from heaven, and covering this sheet were myriad unclean animals - that means animals that were forbidden to the Jew to eat, unclean according to the Hebrew dietary laws. You can read that in verses 13 to 15 of chapter 10. But the voice of God came to him - OK? He's seeing this graphic vision of things that every Jew abhors, and then he hears a voice, and it is the voice of God, and God says: 'Kill and eat! Do not call anything impure that God has made clean'. It says here that he heard that voice three times, the sheet came down three times, and he heard God say three times: 'Kill and eat. Do not call unclean or common what I have cleansed'.

I think it's in Matthew 16 that Jesus gave the keys of the Kingdom to Peter, to open the door of the kingdom to both the Jews and the Gentiles. I believe he did that to the Jews on the Day of Pentecost, and I believe he did it for the Gentiles here in Cornelius' house. He was just the instrument that God was going to use to open the way to allow the Gentile world - that's you and me - to receive salvation, and to know this holy baptism of the Spirit whereby we can know the very power of God to live. Here in Cornelius' house, Peter preached Christ to him and all his servants and his family. He preached to him words whereby he could be saved, and while he was still preaching about Jesus of Nazareth, and how He delivered people from the oppression of the devil, how God was with Him, how He was crucified on the cross for our sins, He was buried and He rose again the third day - while he was still talking, the Holy Spirit fell on the company. They received Christ, they repented, and believed while he was preaching - and the Holy Spirit fell on them.

Look at verses 45-47: 'Those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God. Then Peter answered, 'Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' - this was a new thing! Something completely new! Something foreign! This was a new creation entirely, convention was

being challenged. Now think about this: the ancient theology of Judaism was being challenged. They believed that they alone were God's elect and chosen people, and now here were non-Jews, Gentiles, being gathered into the Kingdom. This challenged the core of their theology, this challenged their biblical interpretation for millennia. Think about it: even etiquette, social etiquette, order and decency was being debunked!

You see, when God acts He challenges convention. He tends to push our boundaries. He squeezes us out of our comfort zones. He confronts our concrete mindsets that are well set. He provokes our prejudices. Listen folks: if you're a believer tonight, you would do well to ever remind yourself that Almighty God, the Holy, Holy, Holy God of Heaven, is not restricted to your convictions or to mine! He doesn't have to have your tastes or your ideas. In Isaiah 55 verses 8 and 9 God says: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways", says the LORD. 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts'. Paul says in Romans 11: 'Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and 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?'. Listen to me tonight: you cannot put God in a box. He is not restricted to your theology. He wasn't restricted to the Hebrew mind, and He'll not be restricted to the Ulster, Protestant, or evangelical mind either! God is bigger.

There is a wonderful little paraphrased translation of the New Testament by J.B. Phillips - but J.B. Phillips also wrote several books, and one of them is called: 'Your God Is Too Small'. Our God is too small, the concepts that we have Him confined into, restricted by. We have made a God in our own image, and we try to control Him. I'm trying my best not to, in any shape or form, be irreverent - but we think that we can just call God at our beck and call. It's as if we have our God as our servant to us, rather than us being His servants and doing His bidding. Whenever God moves convention is challenged - and, indeed, I believe that every move of God's Holy Spirit that there has been in the history of mankind has been opposed. I believe that. In fact, Arthur Wallace, in his little book about revival, says: 'If we find a revival that is not spoken against, we had better look again to ensure that it is revival'. Every awakening, every renewal of God's people, has been spoken against - and the irony is: it is often those who consider themselves to be the most biblically literate that are against what God is doing in the new thing.

In fact, opposition is probably the dominant theme in the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. When you think about it, it's all about Christ's rejection by His own, the Jews. He came to His own, and His own received Him not. Why did they not receive Him? Think about it? They didn't receive Him primarily because He didn't measure up to their expectations of what Messiah should be. They imagined Him riding in on a big stately horse covered in armour, with an army behind Him ready to destroy the Roman Empire - but here He came, meekly, on a donkey, preaching: 'Love your enemy! Turn the other cheek! Do unto others as you would have them do unto you!'. This was a new thing, and it threw the Scribes of Scripture off the scent completely. The biggest opponents to this new thing, Jesus Christ, were the Pharisees. Do you know who the Pharisees were? They were a Jewish sect that were effectively a revival movement. They were the fundamentalists of Judaism. They believed that theology had become liberal, mainly through the Sadducees. The Sadducees didn't believe in resurrection, they didn't believe in angels or spirits, and so the Pharisees came in and they decided:

'We're going to bring every facet of Jewish life into harmony with the Law. We believe the Bible from back to front' - that's the Pharisees.

The tragedy is that they knew their Bibles, but they didn't recognise their God when He turned up in human flesh. Jesus had to say to them in John 5: 'You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life'. They knew the Bible inside out, the Old Testament, they had memorised most of it if not all of it, and yet when the One that the Bible points to and speaks about in prophecies, types, and pictures, He arrived in the flesh - they didn't know Him, and they rejected Him. Ultimately they accused Him of being demon-possessed - the depths that religion can fall to! They saw the miracles, and they are saying: 'The devil made Him do it, He casts out demons by the prince of demons, Beelzebub'. Eventually their hardened hearts led them to crucify the Prince of Life.

Can I tell you tonight: I believe that those who will oppose the new thing that God wants to do in this land, those who will oppose it are the most biblically literate, who think that they know their Bibles back to front - but they don't know the heart of God. John White, in his book 'When the Spirit Comes in Power', a study of revival, says this: 'The hostility to revivals is never to the idea of revival' - what he means is, every Christian worth their salt would like a revival conceptually, the idea of it - he says, 'The idea of revival is ardently prayed for, but the opposition is to God's answer to our prayers and the unexpected form it may take'. He goes on to say: 'To recognise the divine visitation, we must view it through the twin lenses of discernment' - we need to know our Bibles - 'but also humility'. He says: 'It is easy to recognise it in books, or in retrospect, since we are usually accepting the view of the writer of a particular history. To recognise it when it occurs is a more difficult thing'. Listen to this: 'During the revivals of the past 300 years, many Christians were too confused by their wrong expectations to perceive what God was doing'. In other words, when the revival broke onto the scene, those who prayed for revival, longed for revival, and looked for it, didn't see it because it didn't take the form that they had in their preconceived ideas!

You see, whenever we think that we can second-guess God, God scraps the blueprint and He surprises us again. If you know God - and all you need to do is look out of your window one day and see the myriad of colour, the spectrum on the palette of God's creation, the wonderful variety in this natural world - you realise that God is not bound to any scheme, any strategy, any model. He is the God of ultimate variety! He is the God of never-ending new things!

Now, Peter struggled with this new thing - he really did, didn't he? Verse 14 of chapter 10, if you look at it - the Lord showed him this big sheet with all these unclean animals, and the Lord says to him, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat'. Look at verse 14, his reaction: 'Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean'. Have you ever had an argument with the Lord? That's what he was doing, in a sense: 'Not so, Lord!'. You can't say, 'Not so, Lord', you can't say that! You say: 'Well, he did say it' - but what I mean is, you can't really mean that statement, 'Not so, Lord'. There was once a girl came to quite a famous preacher on one occasion, and I'm not sure whether it was a relationship that was in her life that was ungodly, an unequal yoke, or whether it was a career that she was following when she knew the call of God was on her life as we saw it can be upon people's lives last night. But she was struggling with the will of God in one way or another, and this preacher opened his Bible here to Acts

10:14, and he gave this girl a pen, and he says: 'Now, I want you to cross out one of these words. You either cross out the word 'Lord', so it just reads 'Not so'; or you cross out the word 'Not', and you say 'So, Lord' - but you cannot say, as Peter said here, 'Not so, Lord'. He is either Lord of all, or He's not Lord at all.

For too long we have had this shallow profession in Ulster in particular, Sunday-go-to-meeting Christianity one day a week, and maybe a prayer meeting if you're extra special - but day by day there is nothing to separate you out from the man or woman next door. It's time that we realise we are not our own. You're freed from the dominion of Satan - praise God - that slave master, but you're not free as a bird to do what you like, you are bought with the precious blood of Christ, you're the temple of the Holy Spirit, He has set you free to serve Him. The wonderful thing about that is: it's not drudgery, it is true freedom! It's the best life of all! But so many believers are not there: they think that they can have one foot in Christ's Kingdom, and one foot in the world - that's not the way it works, that's why you're miserable tonight!

It was Jim Elliot who I mentioned, that missionary who was martyred for the Lord, who said: 'God always gives His best to those who leave the choice with Him'. Peter struggled with this: 'Not so, Lord! I've never eaten anything that is unclean'. The church, remember it was the Jewish church, struggled with this new thing. It was against everything they had ever known to be true and right. I'm trying my best here tonight, but I don't think we really appreciate the stretch that this was for these Jews. I mean, the Samaritans were unclean to the Jews, and yet the Samaritans were like half-Jews, half-bred Jews. They were seen by the Jews as apostates, they worshipped false gods in another place, in another way - and so it was hard for the Jews to hear Jesus talk about the 'Good Samaritan', that the Samaritan man showed greater characteristics than the Jewish priests who walked by on the other side. It was hard for the Jews to listen to Jesus talk about the one Samaritan leper who came back to thank Jesus for being healed, when the other Jews walked away. It was hard to watch Jesus telling a Samaritan woman who was married five times and living with a fellow, who was untouchable morally, not only religiously but morally and socially, it was hard to hear how she was given living water so that she would never thirst again, and she went home to the men she knew and told them about this Man who told her all things that ever she did, who was the Christ, and the whole town came to Jesus. It was hard for those Jews to comprehend that - but this was another light-year step ahead: true, complete, utter Gentiles, the heathen, the unclean. 'This couldn't be right! I mean, anybody that knows their Bible would know that this is not right!' - you can hear them talking, can't you?

But, you see, they had their prejudicial interpretive spectacles on, that had been forged for thousands of years. They couldn't see the Bible any other way, and they couldn't see God's heart. I want to say this tonight, and it can be taken the wrong way, and people can misquote you and misinterpret you - but it has to be said: a knowledge of the Bible without a personal knowledge of God becomes perverted! God is His own interpreter, and this book has been used to do atrocious things, because people have known, or thought they have known the words, but have not known the Author and His heart.

I know this is maybe new to some of you. Let me take you back, press rewind, and we will go back to Genesis 22 - do you know what happened there? Abraham is told by God: 'Take now your son, your only son Isaac, take him up to Mount Moriah, and

sacrifice him there, and give a burnt offering to Me'. You know the story, don't you? Let's just say you were around in those days, and you were a good Jew, and you knew your Bible. I don't know what you're doing at the bottom of Mount Moriah, maybe you're herding some of your sheep or something like that, or out for a ramble. You notice old Abraham coming along, and young Isaac - he's probably a strapping lad now, a young adult. There is wood and there is fire, and you say: 'How are you doing, Abraham? How's things doing with you and the family?'. You have a bit of a chat, and then you say: 'What are you doing here?'. Abraham says to you: 'Well, God has told me' - wait for it - 'God has told me to take my son, my only son - the son, by the way, who God promised to give me so that out of him would come nations of the world - God has told me to take him up there to that mountain and kill him'. What would you say? I know what I'd say, I'd say: 'Hold on a wee minute, Abraham! Come with me please to Exodus chapter 20, there are ten commands that God gave us, the people of Israel, and one of them is 'You shall not kill'. So there is no way, Abraham, the devil must be speaking to you, or you must be hearing your own voice, because there ain't any way that God would contradict His word, and God would tell you to do something that His word plainly says is wrong'.

Now I'm not trying to bamboozle you or confuse you, is this not in the Bible? You say, 'But hold on a minute, I thought the Scripture was a plumbline, and we hold it up' - that's right, and you would have been right to say 'You shall not kill', because ultimately the Lord didn't allow Abraham to kill his son, He spared his son and provided a lamb, a substitute that pictured Jesus as our substitute. But what I'm trying to get you to see is: you didn't know the end of the story, you didn't know what was in the heart of God, you had a blind spot to what God was doing behind-the-scenes - and we all do! But we're all so quick to judge - we don't know what God is doing, and we have a wee pinhead of knowledge, and we think we know it all. I put myself in there with that. We're very quick to judge, especially when we get a bit of the Bible.

Turn with me to Acts 15, because this did start a controversy in the church. Verse 1, we're reading a few verses here again, Acts 15:1: 'And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved'. Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question. So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren. And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them. But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up', these are boys who were Pharisees and got converted, but they've got this religion still in them, 'saying, 'It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses'. Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: 'Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they'. Then all the multitude kept

silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles. And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, 'Men and brethren, listen to me: Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name'.

Now go down a wee bit further with me to verses 19 and 20: 'Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood'. The NIV says in verse 19: 'We should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God'. Now let me ask you a question: these ex-Pharisees, these Jews, were making it difficult for the Gentiles - have we, as the church of Jesus Christ, made it difficult for anybody who is unchurched to get into the Kingdom of God? Have we not? Have we not? Or let me put it another way: have we who have had the Gospel for hundreds of years in this land of Ireland, made it difficult for the Catholic people to come into the Kingdom of God?

Now I know we can play ping-pong, and we can say: 'Ah, but the church, they were hard, and they wouldn't take the Gospel' - the Church of Rome and all that. We can do all that, we can do all that - it's you and me! It's you and me we need to look at tonight, it's the church, judgement must begin in the house of God - the standards for us are higher than for anyone else. How have we made it difficult for people to come to Christ? The only restrictions that the apostle put on these Gentiles were that they wouldn't eat food polluted by idol worship, they wouldn't engage in fornication, they wouldn't eat anything strangled or with blood. It says here, look at verses 28 and 29, this was a letter they wrote to bring closure to this issue: 'It seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you', Gentiles, 'no greater burden than these necessary things', and he delineates them there - but do you see that statement, 'It seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us', and the Holy Spirit came first!

It's not what seems good to us, but what the Holy Spirit says, and He doesn't lay any unnecessary burdens on these new believers. I'm going to tell you tonight: religion, even the 'Christian' form, is a thing of burdens - but Jesus never came to give us burdens, Jesus came to set us free from burdens. In Matthew 23, Jesus said of the Pharisees: 'They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers'. The New Living Translation translates it: 'They crush people with unbearable religious demands, and never lift a finger to ease the burden'. As the apostle said: they couldn't even bear the burdens themselves. You see, that's the thing about religion, it's always inconsistent, it's always hypocritical, because the ones who are pontificating don't even live up to it themselves, because they can't! Jesus Christ came to set us free from burdens, even the religious ones, that's why He stood in Matthew 11 and He said: 'Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest'. He was talking to people who were laden down with religion. Listen to how The Message renders it: 'Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to Me. Get away with Me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with Me and work with Me - watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with Me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly'. Christianity is meant to make you free. Jesus said: 'You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free. Whom the Son sets free, shall be free indeed'. Paul wrote to the Galatians in Galatians chapter 5 and verse 1 and said: 'It is for freedom that Christ has set you free. Stand firm then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a

yoke of slavery'.

But, you see, there is a legalist in all of us, it's part of Adam, part of our flesh - we want to contribute. In the Galatian church, in the book of Galatians, this was becoming a real problem - because some of these Judaisers travelled to Galatia and started to poison them with this teaching that they needed to become like Jews, these Gentiles. But do you know what the tragedy is? Peter, who took the key that Christ give him to open the door of the Kingdom to the Gentiles, Peter who was the instrument to usher in this new thing; he himself actually stumbled at the offence! Isn't that incredible? Look at Galatians quickly with me, Galatians chapter 2 verse 11, Paul is writing and he says of Peter: 'Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James', that's in Jerusalem, 'he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision' - that's the fear of man. 'And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, 'If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles' - in other words, if Christ has set you free from the Law and all that it means, and you don't live as Jews any more yourselves - "why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?"

Isn't it incredible that a man who God used to usher in this new thing, to challenge convention, actually got sucked into that religious spirit again? It's not really a surprise. Do you know, there are many people who have seen the blessing of God in their own personal life, or indeed on their church or on the community, but ended up speaking against and working against the new thing that God was doing. George Whitefield, that great evangelist, had tracts written against him in a place called Cambuslang in Scotland, some of you may have heard of it. Cambuslang was a place that was known for revival, and yet George Whitefield - one of the greatest torches for revival that the English-speaking world has ever known - was spoken against because he was Church of England! He was called 'a limb of antichrist' by these believers who had known the fresh Spirit coming from heaven in awakening - imagine that!

Sometimes those who have known revival are the worst, or those who pray for revival, or want revival are the worst in requiring God to work in the same way that He did before. So they don't recognise the new thing that He is breaking on the scene. Evan Roberts, in the Welsh revival of 1904-1905, was denounced by a Congregational minister by the name of Peter Price as 'a sham, a mockery, a blasphemous travesty of the real thing' - that's what he said about the revival! What makes this even more sad was the fact that Price's own church at Dowlais had been blessed with revival, and the addition of hundreds of converts, a few months previously in 1904. He had revival, and yet he didn't appreciate the new thing that God was doing in another brother, in another church.

Now certain cardinal truths and characteristics of revival will always be the same, but we've got to waken up to the fact that revival will wear new clothes - and God's new thing will not look the way it did a century ago, or in 1859, or however far back you want to go. I like lobster, but I learned something about lobster recently - that it grows by shedding its skin, did you know that? Before it sheds the old skin, it has to grow a thin, new layer of skin beneath the old shell. It moults 25 times in the first 5 to 7 years of its life. So you might say that, for the lobster, the skin changes, but the DNA, or the

nature of the lobster is the same - it's always a lobster. In the same way, the skin of the church has to change as it grows, as it adapts to the age that God has birthed it for in the present day and generation. The DNA still is the same, the cardinal truths of the Gospel are still the same, but if the church does not shed its old skin - like the lobster - she will die!

I believe the old skin of the church in Ulster is dying. It's not completely gone yet, and people are trying to hang on to it, they're trying to breathe life into a corpse. It never ceases to amaze me how people can tell you: 'Oh, the Lord started this work in', whatever date, 'and this is how it started'. You never hear anybody saying: 'The Lord told us in 2000 and whatever to finish the work'. Nothing ever finishes, they start a work and they do everything to keep the doors open - and it's like breathing life into a corpse. Many works and churches have a name that they live, but they are dead! I want to say to you tonight, and I believe this: the sooner we let some of these works die out, the faster we would have a resurrection!

A popular definition of insanity is: insanity is doing the same thing you've always done the same way you've always done it, and yet expecting a different result. I believe - and I have cause to believe - that there is a new layer of skin growing beneath the old skin. It's thin, and it's not strong enough to come to the fore, but it's growing. This is biblical, you know. Turn with me quickly to Mark chapter 2 - I'll not keep you much longer - Jesus, our Lord, verse 21, speaking to Judaism said: 'No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth', that's a piece of new cloth, 'on an old garment; or else the new piece pulls away from the old, and the tear is made worse'. That simply means that if you put new cloth, sew it on to old, and you put it in the washing machine - the new will pull away and rip a hole as it shrinks. Verse 22: 'And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine bursts the wineskins, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined. But new wine must be put into new wineskins'. What Jesus was saying to the Jews is: the old form of Judaism will not be fit for the new wine of the Spirit that's about to be poured out at Pentecost.

There's nothing wrong with the laws of God in the Old Testament, but Judaism had perverted God's laws by the traditions of the elders and by religious hypocrisy. Anyway, Jesus had to come to fulfil those laws, we no longer are under the old covenant, but the new covenant - the life of the Spirit of Christ Jesus has made us free from the law of sin and death. But Judaism wasn't fit for purpose, there needed to be new wineskins - and I believe the old wineskins of the church are not sufficient for the new thing that God wants to break out among us.

But would you consider something for me tonight: some people have attempted to put the old wine into new wineskins. What do I mean? Well, they're just revamping church without new wine, without the release of the Spirit, without repentance, without faith and seeking the Lord, without surrender, without breaking up the fallow ground, without spiritual exercise. They know that something needs to happen, so they attempt to put the old wine into new wineskins, they promote a model to accelerate church growth, to have a mega-church. They use marketing principles, business acumen, they hold seminars and conferences, and have promotional drives telling us how to make our churches more successful and appealing - and what we're doing is, we are becoming like chameleons, changing to suit our environment. We find the church becoming more contemporary today. Don't misunderstand me, I love new praise - because when God does a new thing, by the way, there is a new song, with every

revival there has always been a new hymn book, new expressions of praise. Don't say that I'm against things that are new, I'm not - but just new wineskins and old wine will not do. There must be new wine and new wineskins. Just to be contemporary - we look at it and we see that much of the church has become contemporary - but they have become less effective, and they have actually lost their identity. You can go to plenty of contemporary places, and you can walk in in your sin and walk out and not know one iota how to get right with God.

You see, the church was meant to be distinctive. The church was not meant to blend in like a chameleon. The church was meant to be a light on a hill, Jesus said. Whenever we have a church that society is happy with, and they are looking for, and whenever we go round door-to-door with a questionnaire asking: 'What kind of church would you like?' - when we do that for them, we've got the opposite of what God wants in His church! I'm not saying we don't be open to the people around us - you know from my preaching these nights that we need to be churches that reach out to our community - but we need to have what they need, the light of the Gospel. I'm not espousing having a church stuck in the dark ages. There are some of our churches, and we could put a fence round them and sell tickets as a museum of how things were done a hundred years ago! A man came to me the other day, I was preaching on 'a new song' - and he come to me the other day, he says: 'Last Sunday in our church, the newest song we sung was written in 1854!' - and he was depressed, because he's a man of today, the 21st-century. Whilst these old hymns, many of them, are timeless - some of them aren't. But there's a new song as well, and it's a balance we need: connected with the past, but also expressing what God is doing in this present generation the way they express themselves - with balance, of course.

Modernising the church is not the answer, if it's only new wineskins for old wine. If all we do is superimpose new paradigms on old problems, we're going to get nowhere. It's not innovation we need, it's a radical reformation of heart - in fact, we need more than a reformation, we need renewal, we need revival. One thing is sure, we need something radical, and we need something now! In Isaiah 43, the Israelites, who always looked back to the Red Sea deliverance, the exodus from Egypt through the Red Sea and eventually into the wilderness and Canaan Land, they celebrated it by the Passover. Now they find themselves in captivity in Babylon, but they are still looking back to the exodus in Egypt - and God comes to them and He says: 'Forget the former things, do not dwell in the past. See, I am doing a new thing, now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness, and streams in the wasteland'. What He's saying is: 'You've got a crick in your neck. You're looking to the past about what I used to do, and you're not realising that I am a God who could give you an exodus now out of Babylon to your own land. I'm still the same!'

If ever we have learnt that God is the same, it's this week. That's what this book of Acts teaches us: we must not confine God to our sphere of knowledge of Him, or our expectations of Him, because we can actually miss the new things that He is doing. See how the NIV renders it: 'Do you not perceive it? Now it springs up'. He's doing it now! I believe God is doing something, I believe He has been doing something this week in these meetings. I believe there is a new thing breaking forth, it's that thin skin of the lobster - it hasn't come to the fore yet, but God is preparing: there are yet 7000 who have not bowed the knee to Baal - and He is preparing a remnant for something that He wants to do, I believe, in the heart of God. Surely the Lord never intended your biblical convictions to become restrictions to Him doing His will in your life?

See God's new thing, quickly, as we bring this to a close - Ephesians chapter 2. God's new thing is a new man, God's new thing is a new man. Ephesians 2 verses 14-15: 'For He', Christ, 'Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity'. Isn't that wonderful? God's vision, God's heart was to bring the Jew and the Gentile together in Jesus Christ. I want to tell you tonight, God's heart is to bring the unionist and nationalist, the loyalist and republican, the Protestant and the Catholic together under the banner of the blood of Jesus Christ. That's God's new man, and it's about time the church got out of the way and let Him at it!

What a challenge God is to convention when He acts. Vance Havner said: 'Sunday morning Christianity is the greatest hindrance to true revival'. Tongue-in-cheek, Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who was no raving modernist, said: 'Fancy upsetting the clock-like mechanical perfection of a great service with an outpouring of the Spirit - the thing is unthinkable!'. Oh, that's what we need, that's what we need. The new thing, in a sense, is nothing new at all. Some people say to me: 'Oh, we need to get back to the days of Whitefield and Wesley' - no. Some say: 'Oh, we need to get back to the day of the 1859 revival' - no. Some folk say: 'We need to get back to the reformers' - no. We need to get back to the Acts. The church needs to return to the ways which God originally intended for His people: Acts, when He does His work His way.

Let us pray. I'm conscious of the presence of God here tonight, I hope you are too. I don't know what your state is before God, you mightn't even be a Christian. I know I haven't been preaching an evangelistic message as such, but I think there's enough in the message tonight for you to realise your need of Christ, and that you can have Him tonight. You've maybe encountered the Power of God here this evening. I want to challenge you just now, before I address the Christians: would you come to Christ tonight? Would you repent of your sin? That means change your mind and your heart about what is destroying your life, what is going to damn your soul, and turn from it with the power of God, and turn to Christ for salvation. I'm talking to you tonight who has never been born again, you've never been saved. I don't care how long you've been in the church, I don't care if you were baptised and catechised, I don't care a bit - and God doesn't care either. If you're not born again by the Spirit of God, Jesus says you will never see the Kingdom of God. Will you be saved tonight? Who here this evening in the meeting will say, 'I will come to Christ'? Just where you're sitting, if you raise your hand we will give you a prayer to pray - confess Christ and your need of Him by acknowledging that you want to be a Christian tonight. Would you raise your hand just where you're seated, young or old? Heads bowed and eyes closed. Pray, believers, for those who are in the balance tonight. Is there anyone tonight, before this week of meetings is over - you've been in God's presence perhaps on previous evenings - is there anyone who will say, 'I'm going to make it right with God tonight'? Is there anyone, just raise your hand and confess Jesus Christ and your need of Him. Is there anyone?

Is there a backslider? Is there someone who has wandered away from the Lord, you've grown cold, and you want to come back to the Lord tonight? You don't want to miss what God's doing - is there anyone who wants to come back to the Lord tonight, just

raise your hand to acknowledge it where you're sitting. Is there anyone? Slip it up and down and I'll see it, and we will pray with you and for you.

Now we will pray in just a moment, but I want to address everyone in these closing moments. Listen, I really am not about saying, 'Oh, there was one, or two, or three did this or that or the other' - it's not about that, we want to give you an opening to respond to what the Spirit is saying in your heart. Is there anybody, specifically with the message tonight, that needs to repent of putting God in a box, needs to repent of the tradition of the elders which has made null and void the very word of God? Is there anybody who needs to confess that they have put their doctrine over devotion to Jesus Christ? Is there anybody that needs to confess they are a bigot? Is there anybody that needs to confess prejudice and hatred in their heart? Is there anybody that needs to confess that they have put obstacles in front of people coming to Jesus - maybe they have been an obstacle, maybe you have been an obstacle to a husband or wife, or to a brother or sister, or to an employee? Now I'm not going to ask you to respond to that - you respond to the Lord - but what I will do tonight is: in the light of the ministry that has been given this week - and I know, but I know, but I know, that it's from the heart of God - if I was to tell you how I got it all, I got it all in a matter of maybe an hour or two, lying on the settee listening to the Acts of the Apostles. Now I had to work it all out, but I got every subject and the outlines for most of them - it's from the heart of God.

At the end of it all, at the end of it all, are there folk here who will say: 'I will not let this series of meetings pass by without surrendering completely to the Lord; without repenting of that sin that has been a hold and a bondage of my life; without deciding that it's not about religion, it's not about churchianity, it's about my relationship with Jesus, and my relationship with my brothers and sisters, and even my enemies'. Is there anybody here tonight who will say, 'I want to be a part of this new thing, I don't want to miss it! I don't want to be stuck in the annals of history. I want to see what God is doing today, I want to be in the middle of when God acts and does things His way'. If that's you tonight - and I really do want every head bowed and eye closed, this is between God and you, nobody else, so if you're not interested in this mind your own business - but between you and the Lord, will you stand to your feet tonight, and will you say: 'This is a line in the sand, and I want God to act in me and through me, I want filled and immersed in the Holy Spirit, I want everything that God has for me. I am deciding to follow Him, no turning back, whatever the cost might be I'm following Jesus' - just stand to your feet tonight. I'm already standing, if I were sitting I would be standing myself, because it's a daily thing for me - it has to be a daily thing if it's worth anything. Take up your cross and follow Him daily. If you really mean it, stand to your feet - and you talk to the Lord, I'm not going to even tell you what to pray.

If you need to get saved, just confess your sins. If you want to come back to the Lord, confess sin, repent of it, thank Jesus for dying for you. Ask Him to receive you, and cleanse you, and save you, and fill you with the Holy Spirit - just do that where you're sitting, the same if you're a backslider. But you tonight, as a believer dealing with God, now do not vow to the Lord and not repay. It would be better not to vow as to vow and not pay. Do not utter anything out of your mouth rashly. There might be a cost for what you're doing, you might have to remove idols in your heart, you might have to remove idols in the church. There are idols in the church, Israel had idols in the very court of the Temple of God in the book of Ezekiel - an idol to an unclean, sexual god in the Temple! They put up with it, they accommodated it - it's time that there was a

clear out of the rubbish out of the house of God, as in the days of Hezekiah. Take the rubbish out and dump it. You talk to the Lord as you stand tonight, just talk to the Lord - even those who can't stand or haven't, but are dealing with God, you talk to the Lord, tell Him your heart.

Father, I want to thank You for visiting us this week - we do not take it for granted. In a dry and thirsty land where no water is, we thank You that You have walked with us and You have talked with us, and we have had the Lord Jesus reveal Himself to us from the scriptures. But more, we believe You have revealed Yourself in us, and You have penetrated our hearts - we want, Lord, there to be a lasting work. O God, let there be a mighty, mighty seismic change in our lives, and in our homes, and in this church, and in this town, and in the churches in this town, and the community. Lord, as we prayed the other night, let Your glory fall on this room, let it go forth from here to the nations. We want, Lord, there to be no limit, because You are the God who is able to do exceeding abundantly more than we ask or think. You are the God who is able to make all grace abound. So, Lord, do Your work, do it Your way, for Your glory. Amen.

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