

# TABLE TALK

MAY 2024 | \$5



## Church Planting


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# Planting the Church

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**T**HE MISSION OF GOD EXISTS for the glory of God, and the glory of God is the end for which God created the world. God created the world so that man, who is made in His image, would have the earth to inhabit, fill, and rule over. From all eternity, God purposed to save people from every tribe, tongue, and nation for Himself so that He would be glorified. Since God is sufficient in Himself and needs nothing, He does not need us. But the good news is that God desires us, created us, and saved us for His glory. All that God created and all that God sovereignly sustains throughout the world and throughout the universe are for the purpose of His having a people for Himself for His ultimate glory. Simply put, creation is ultimately for the church, and the church is ultimately for the glory of God.

The church on earth throughout history is the visible, called-out assembly of God's people. Fundamentally, this is why we as the people of God don't go to church on the Lord's Day—we are the church, and we go to worship. The buildings in which we worship are sanctuaries where the church of Jesus Christ gathers weekly to worship our holy and triune God. As we gather, wherever we are throughout the world, we are helping to fulfill the Great Commission of Jesus Christ as we continually take part in the ordinary means of grace and learn as Christ's disciples to observe all that Christ commanded.

Making disciples is what the Great Commission is all about, and that is why the one, holy, catholic (universal), and Apostolic church, both locally and globally, is about church planting. For where the gospel is preached, by God's sovereign grace, the church is planted as believers gather together from every tribe, tongue, and nation. That is why church planting is not merely something we do; it is fundamental to who we are. We are the church—planted by the preaching of the gospel, which is the power of God to salvation by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, through the powerful work of the Spirit of God for the glory of God. This is why faithful local churches throughout the world will always be fully committed to the ongoing work of church planting and caring well for church planters and their families, because this is the very reason we exist—for the church and for the mission of God for the ultimate glory of God. 

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# The Mission of God as the Grounds of Church Planting



MICHAEL G. BROWN

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Before our Lord Jesus ascended into heaven, He gave His Apostles the Great Commission: “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age*” (Matt. 28:18–20). This is arguably the most important text in all Scripture for understanding the church’s responsibility in missions and church planting. We must be careful, however, not to overlook the first part of this divine mandate. The Great Commission does not begin with the command “Go.”

Instead, it begins with an awe-inspiring announcement that Christ possesses all authority in heaven and on earth. To put it in grammatical terms, Christ stated an indicative before He issued an imperative. The church’s mission of going into the world, preaching the gospel, planting churches, and making disciples of Jesus is grounded

in what God has already accomplished in His mission.

God is the original missionary. From the beginning, His mission was to create the world and redeem a people for Himself who would glorify and enjoy Him forever. In one sense, the whole Bible is a mission document. It reveals how the Father sent the Son to

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accomplish redemption for the elect, and how the Son sent the Spirit to call the elect from every tongue, nation, and tribe into His kingdom, equipping them for a life of worship and service to the glory of God.

### **GOD'S MISSION FROM ETERNITY**

R.B. Kuiper said, "Evangelism has its roots in eternity." We can say the same about church planting. The underlying reason that we plant churches is that before the creation of the world, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit established a covenant with one another to redeem the elect and bring them to glory. Reformed theologians call this the *covenant of redemption*. In this covenant, the Father gave to the Son those whom He chose to save (John 6:37; 10:29; Eph. 1:4–6; 2 Tim. 1:9) and appointed Him to accomplish their salvation through His obedient life, atoning death, and glorious resurrection (John 5:30, 36, 43; 10:18; Rom. 5:12–19). He also promised the Son a reward upon the completion of His work (Pss. 40:6–8; 110; Isa. 53; Heb. 1:1–13; 5:5–6). The Son accepted the Father's gift and freely consented to be our Mediator, who as the incarnate Savior would submit to the Father's will (Luke 22:42; John 4:34; 6:38).

This is why during His earthly ministry, Jesus often spoke of a commission given to Him by the Father. For example, the night before He was crucified, Jesus prayed:

*"Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. . . . I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed." (John 17:1–2, 4–5)*

Throughout this prayer, Jesus refers to those

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whom the Father "gave" to Him (that is, the elect in Christ) at least seven times (17:2, 6, 9, 10, 11, 24). His mission was to save them through His obedience to the will of the Father. The next day, as He hung on the cross and suffered the wrath of God for the sins of those whom the Father had given to Him, His last words were "It is finished" (19:30). What was finished? The work that the Father had given Him to do. These comments reveal a mutual pre-determined plan between the Father and the Son made in eternity past.

The Holy Spirit also had a role in the covenant of redemption. As a member of the triune Godhead, the Holy Spirit always acts in concert with the Father and the Son, and the Father and Son never act apart from the Spirit. His responsibility was to apply the benefits earned by the Son to the elect and unite them with the Son forever (Eph. 1:13–14; see also John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7). Moreover, the Scriptures reveal that the Spirit caused the Son to assume a real human nature by the Virgin Mary (Matt. 1:18; Luke 1:35; 2:40). It was through the Spirit that Christ offered Himself to the Father (Heb. 9:14). And it was the Spirit who caused Christ to be raised from the dead (Rom. 8:11). Without the Spirit's fulfilling these critical tasks, the covenant of redemption would never have been accomplished.

The covenant of redemption is God's mission planned before the creation of the world by the members of the Trinity. It is the basis and driving purpose of all redemptive history. Without it, there would be no election, no incarnation of the Son, no cross, no resurrection, no forgiveness of sins, no hope of eternal life, and no need to plant churches.

### **GOD'S MISSION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

God's mission to redeem His elect through Christ is progressively revealed in the Old Testament. When God exiled Adam and Eve

from the garden because of their rebellion, He also promised that He would send a champion to crush the serpent's head, providing a new and living way to the Tree of Life (Gen. 3). He would bring salvation to the ends of the earth through the seed of the woman. We get a fuller picture of this mission in the unfolding drama of redemptive history. God made His gracious covenant with Abraham, promising him a people and a land (chs. 12; 15; 17). He promised to use Abraham to bring salvation to people throughout the world: "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (12:3; see also 22:18). Many generations later, fulfilling His covenant promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Lord graciously delivered the Israelites out of Egypt (Ex. 6:2–8; 12:51). Out of all peoples, God made them His treasured possession, "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (19:5–6). God's mission to redeem His elect seemed for a time to become far narrower with the nation of Israel, as Moses reminded them: "Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. Yet the LORD set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day" (Deut. 10:14–15). Still, God called Israel to share His love with strangers. In the same passage, He said: "He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt" (vv. 18–19). This love of God for sojourners was demonstrated by the inclusion of Rahab and her Canaanite family within the covenant people of God (Josh. 6:22–25) and in the inclusion of Ruth the Moabite (Ruth 1:16; 4:13–17), both women being ancestors of Jesus (Matt. 1:5).

These promises took on greater clarity in God's covenant with King David, to whom He said, "I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and

I will establish his kingdom" (2 Sam. 7:12). The nations would bow down to this royal Son of God or else be broken with a rod of iron and dashed into pieces through His just judgment (Ps. 2:9). In becoming the possession of this Davidic King through the redemptive grace of God, however, the nations would be blessed in Him (Ps. 72:17), for He would be their Savior, "a covenant for the people, a light for the nations" (Isa. 42:6). To Christ, God the Father says, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isa. 49:6). Throughout the Old Testament, the people of God looked forward to the promised Messiah, who would vanquish Satan and usher in God's glorious kingdom.

#### **GD'S MISSION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

In the fullness of time, God the Father sent His eternal Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, to live, die, and rise again to ransom a people "from every tribe and language and people and nation." He has made them "a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth" (Rev. 5:9–10). Throughout redemptive history, God repeatedly promised to provide a Savior, and He fulfilled these promises in the person and work of Christ. He is the last Adam, the offspring of Abraham, the true Israel, the heir of David's throne, and the Messiah proclaimed by the prophets. Having accomplished His mission, Christ has been awarded all authority in heaven and on earth. He has authority over all flesh to give eternal life to all whom the Father gave to Him (John 17:2). He will build His church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it (Matt. 16:18).

The ordinary ministry of Word and sacrament are the means that God uses to build

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His church. Church planting, therefore, is an essential component of the mission of God. This becomes clear when we consider how the Apostles sought to fulfill the Great Commission. After receiving the power of the Spirit (Acts 2:1–4), they preached the gospel (vv. 14–36), baptized people (vv. 37–41), and began meeting weekly with those who “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (v. 42). Thus, the first new covenant church was planted. The entire book of Acts goes on to describe how this pattern of planting churches continued, following Jesus’ prophecy that the Apostles would be His witnesses “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (1:8). The Apostles went throughout the world preaching the gospel, baptizing believers and their households, and planting churches, where they appointed elders to oversee the new disciples (14:21–23; Titus 1:5).

#### **GOD’S MISSION TODAY**

Until the end of the age, Christ continues to advance His mission and build His church from peoples all over the globe. The old covenant confined God’s kingdom to one particular nation and language, but the new covenant expands Israel’s borders to the ends of the earth, making one new man between believing Jews and gentiles (Eph. 2:14). The gospel is for people of every race, tribe, and nationality. Christians are black, white, Asian, Hispanic, and more because of

God’s promise to Abraham that he would be a light to the nations. The Christian faith is not a northern European faith or a Semitic faith but an international, global faith in which “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). In a world that is typically segregated by our geographical boundaries, cultural identities, and consumer preferences, the mission of God announced in the gospel of Jesus Christ creates a multiethnic community that is “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession” (1 Peter 2:9).

This should encourage us tremendously as we seek to engage in mission work and plant churches on domestic and foreign soil. God the Father has sent the Son, and the Son, having accomplished the work that the Father gave Him to do, has ascended into heaven and has sent the Spirit upon His church, and the Spirit in turn sends the church throughout the world. In one sense, the church’s mission is simply to claim the prize that the Lord Jesus has already won. The Spirit sends us to plant and water in the field that belongs to Christ, and Christ will ensure the increase (1 Cor. 3:6), for all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Him. 

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# God's Blueprint for His Mission



ROBERT VANDOODEWAARD

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There was a time when the Western world seemed to be saturated with churches. The diligence and prayers of former generations had led to skylines filled with steeples. Even small villages were dotted with chapels. Then, some people began to think that bigger was always better. We were impressed by massive crusades and megachurches. It was assumed that we would be best served by the most programmed church with the most articulate preacher in our region. Many people left for seemingly greener pastures, while others fell away entirely. Many faithful churches were shuttered and sold off. Some did not realize that we were retreating. In the midst of it all, we seemed to lose God's blueprint for His mission.



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Regardless of how big or small a church is, what matters is that it is faithful and fruitful. We should rejoice whenever and wherever Christ is preached (Phil. 1:18). The broader trends of the past century, however, should compel us to revisit God's blueprint for His mission. Iain H. Murray, in his book *Evangelicalism Divided*, gave a careful analysis of the impact of twentieth-century evangelical missions. He showed that those who were reached by broader missions efforts needed not just to be called to repentance and faith in Christ but also to be personally disciplined in the context of faithful local churches. When this did not happen, many left Christianity behind, more confused and jaded than before.

More is required than broad scattering of seeds. Watering, fertilizing, and careful pruning are also vital components of missions. Believers need to worship alongside neighbors who we know love the Lord. Office bearers need to give personalized edification, encouragement, loving rebuke, and tender restoration. There is a need to be salt and light among our neighbors. This means that existing churches need to focus their efforts on planting new local congregations that worship reverently, preach the gospel faithfully, administer the sacraments properly, and discipline their members lovingly. If the church is to regain lost ground, we need to return to God's blueprint.

When we step back and look at the broad themes of the Bible, we see that God calls His people out again and again. He called Adam and Eve out of hiding. He called Noah to build an ark and escape an evil world. He called Abraham out of the east, away from the worship of other gods (Josh. 24:2). He called Israel out of Egypt (Hos. 11:1). Christ called His disciples to leave everything behind (Mark 10:21). God's

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*If the church is to regain lost ground, we need to return to God's blueprint.*

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people are called out of "Babylon" (Rev. 18:4). A foundational part of being the church means being called out. God's people have been summoned to the throne of grace. It means abandoning hope in this world itself and casting ourselves on Christ alone. It also means being called into a visible expression of Christ's body: a local, faithful church.

Being "called out" means leaving behind sinful attachments to this world and instead being joined to the body of Christ (Eph. 2:19–22). Being the church means that we must leave behind any worldly motives or practices that are rooted in trendiness, pragmatism, or showmanship. It means putting the worship of God above all else. This does not mean, however, abandoning the lost who live around us. To seek them out and call them in brings glory to God (Luke 15:7, 10, 32). The lost need to come under a local ministry where their particular sins and struggles will be addressed. They need neighbors who love them and who will show them the love of Christ. This will mean taking up our cross and making God's ordinary means for missions central. Being "called out," for some believers, may also mean being called out of a larger church and into a church plant or smaller local church. It may mean a calling

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to an area where churches are few. It may mean becoming part of a church that is small or struggling.

Woven through the biblical theme of being called out is another theme: being “gathered in.” The Israelites were called out of their homes and gathered to worship the Lord at His house (Ex. 23:14; Ps. 95). Their calendar was designed to revolve around the routines of feasts and sacrifices. Sadly, they lost this privilege during the exile. Yet even when they were scattered across the world by evil empires, they began to meet in local synagogues to read God’s Word and pray. Usually these gatherings were Sabbath meetings held within walking distance of most of the believers in a region. It was the custom of our Lord Jesus Christ to worship in synagogues regularly (Luke 4:16). As the ancient church progressed, it became clear that God had prepared those local assemblies as part of the blueprint for His church. When we put the themes of “called out” and “gathered in” together, we see the outlines of His master plan.

The outcome of the Apostles’ mission was the planting of churches. They called people to faith and gathered them in. When the Apostles came to a city, they often brought the gospel into the Jewish synagogues. Though some listened, the Apostles were frequently driven out. They also evangelized in the marketplaces and other meeting places. Converted Jews and gentiles then gathered in homes, outdoors, or in halls. Hints in the Bible, as well as historical sources, tell us that these believers followed similar patterns to those of the Jewish synagogues. They came together to worship the Lord: to sing, read Scripture, pray, preach, break bread, and give offerings. They were called to assemble to stir one another up to love and good works (Heb. 10:24–25). They were

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also warned of the danger of forsaking these assemblies. When false teachers and apostates left the Christian gatherings behind, it was a sad testimony of their leaving the faith (1 John 2:19). These local church gatherings on the Lord’s Day became the foundation of orthodox Christianity (Acts 20:7).

If we are honest about the New Testament, we will say that much of it is actually a church-planting history and manual. The titles of many of the New Testament letters are the names of ancient cities, and the letters are addressed to the fledgling churches in those places. Apostles spent months, and sometimes even years, helping these congregations get on their feet (see Acts 20:31). The personal greetings and individual rebukes found in their letters tell us that these were intimate gatherings. The New Testament Epistles also show that new churches face challenges. Corinth struggled with immorality, Galatia with heresy, Colossae with strange philosophies, and Thessalonica with troubling ideas about the end times. The next generation of pastors, including Timothy and Titus, was equipped to edify and lead in these new churches. Elders were to be appointed in every town (Titus 1:5). In church plants, guidance and advice will be needed from a body of elders. Outside encouragement and advice may also be needed. If we are to do well at church planting, denominations, presbyteries, synods, or networks will be needed for spiritual, prayerful, and financial support.

When Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70, God’s plan continued to be revealed. Christians fled Judea. The temple could no longer be the focal point of assembly. The church was decentralized, and this proved to be a blessing. The many small local churches were places of hospitality and

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refuge for Christians, who were increasingly being persecuted. Local churches became known for their love and good works and for their care for slaves, widows, orphans, and the weak. In time, those churches would grow and would begin to send out missionaries to continue the cycle of life. Churches were planted across Europe and well into Asia and Africa. Though these churches may have seemed small, scattered, and insignificant, they would eventually change the world. The evil and perversion of the Roman Empire would lead to its own downfall. The truth and grace of God's Word would sustain and strengthen His churches.

Christianity needs to recover this blueprint. Many of our neighborhoods, and entire sections of some cities, are now unfamiliar with the preaching of God's Word. Many of us are surrounded by immigrants and refugees from around the world. They need to be called into faithful local churches that are willing to disciple them. It is also in the context of new church plants that many believers testify that they learned to be more than "consumers." Church plants and small churches often bring meaningful opportunities for the acts of service, fellowship, and hospitality that the New Testament Epistles call us to. It is in this context that many

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have had to bear burdens, forge new relationships, and stir up love. They have learned to interact closely with people from different backgrounds. In smaller assemblies, it may become more evident that "the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable" (1 Cor. 12:22). We can relearn to value the real, living network that is forged through worshiping together and fellowshiping together with neighbors.

This does not mean that church plants will be painless places. There may be a perception that the preaching or the programs are not quite as polished as in other places. Less-than-ideal venues and curious visitors may make for challenging days. Financial struggles can add stress. Discontentedness can easily spread where there is less predictability. A brother once said to me: "An established large church can feel more like a passenger ship: some waves may hardly be felt, and the movement of a passenger has little effect; it may be more comfortable for longer seasons. But a church plant can feel like a small boat: pulled around by currents, tossed by small waves, easily rocked by individuals, and difficult to get up and going." Though this may be true, it is precisely such challenges that have been used to sanctify God's people and cause them to cast their cares

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*Churches are to use the ordinary means of grace in the ingathering and upbuilding of saints. They are to be continually looking to spread the gospel to more neighborhoods, more cities, and more rural areas.*

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on Him. The challenges of church planting testify loud and clear that it is only God who gives the increase (1 Cor. 3:7).

God's plan for missions is not merely to distribute free passes out of hell and then leave individuals to their own devices. His plan does indeed rest on the beautiful hope of redemption from the wrath of God, and this is good news. His ultimate aim, however, is to seek and shape true worshipers by His Word and Spirit (John 4:23). The means that He gave for this is local churches and church plants, where neighbors gather for communion with Him and one another. Christ called His disciples to make disciples and to teach them "to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20). Churches are to use the ordinary means of grace in the ingathering and upbuilding of saints. They are to be continually looking to spread the gospel to more neighborhoods, more cities, and more rural areas. They are to focus on simple, Word-centered worship. We are to sing God's Word, pray according to God's Word, and preach from God's Word. Such gatherings will seem small and foolish to some and may at times be a little less polished and a little rougher around the edges than in established churches. Where the Word is opened, however, the Spirit will be working. Let us pray for nations that are soon saturated with faithful, ordinary-means-of-grace church plants. 📖

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# God's Tools for His Mission

JOEL FICK

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In 1 Corinthians 3:5–10, Paul uses a mixed metaphor to describe the congregation at Corinth both as a plant and as a building:

*What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.*

*According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it.*



This passage is one of the reasons that we speak about new congregations as church plants. In this particular congregation in Corinth, God's workers Paul and Apollos were like tools in His hands—one planting, another watering, while God provided the growth.

If you've ever done any gardening, you know that certain things are essential to the growth and development of healthy young plants, things such as nutrient-rich soil, water and sunlight in appropriate amounts, proper spacing, pruning, and protection. If you nurture a young plant or sapling in the proper way, you give it the best possible chance of success. And yet there is still something mysterious about the process. Some plants just seem to have a vigor that others do not. Saplings provided with exactly same environmental conditions can sometimes produce very different results. Indeed, some plants die in the nursery before they even have the chance to be transplanted to the orchard. Ultimately, while the gardener is responsible to do his very best to ensure the success

of the plant, he knows that God must give the growth.

So it is with church planting. Churches are born and churches die. But the failure of some does not reduce the responsibility of the workers to do all that they can to ensure the growth and vitality of those that survive. Thankfully, because we have Christ's promise that He will build His church, we know that many not only will survive but will thrive and bear fruit for the kingdom of God. That means that we His servants can go about our gospel labor with confidence and courage, knowing that God will provide the growth. This article endeavors to answer some of the questions about how we as God's fellow workers have attempted to give our church plants the best possible start so that they might grow and flourish into robust and thriving Reformed congregations of Christ.

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*Fruit trees produce fruit not just for eating but for propagating. That means that healthy, fruitful churches need to be cultivated in such a way that they desire to produce other healthy and fruitful churches.*

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That begins with local churches' being committed to the work of church planting. Fruit trees produce fruit not just for eating but for propagating. That means that healthy, fruitful churches both locally and internationally need to be cultivated in such a way that they desire to produce other healthy and fruitful churches. Church leaders need to cultivate a vision for church planting among their members. Here are some steps for church leaders to take to foster such a vision.

Begin simply by talking about it and praying about it. Give regular reports on the work of church planting being done in the presbytery or denomination of which you are a part. Learn the names of the church planters in your presbytery or denomination and how you as a body can be praying for them. Put church planting in the budget so that the members have a real stake in the work.

Our church has supported church planting financially in two ways. First, we support our denominational and presbytery efforts in church planting through their respective home missions committees. Actually, we have done this from our inception as a church plant. Even while we were still receiving support from our regional church, we were giving back to the work of church planting. We desired from the very outset to be a sending and

self-propagating church. To that end, the second way that we budget for church planting is by creating a specific fund with a view to planting a daughter church of our own. We talk about it, pray about it, and put money toward it. As we commit our resources to church planting in these various ways, we are preparing the soil of the hearts of our members to desire to be a part of the effort. And it is our prayer that some of these members may one day desire to be a part of the core group of a church plant themselves.

That brings me to say something about the various ways that faithful churches and denominations have gone about the work of church planting. There are three principal ways that church planting has typically been done. We might call them the mother-daughter model, the core-group model, and the parachute-plant model.

A mother-daughter plant is the kind of plant that our church hopes to take part in someday. In this model, a healthy mother church births a daughter church. Sometimes this model materializes when a mother church has several committed families driving some distance from an area where there is no faithful Reformed church. This presents an opportunity to consider planting and supporting a daughter church from among those committed families. This model can be a real blessing both to the mother church

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and to the daughter church. It can be a little daunting, to be sure, for a mother church to send out a number of families together with their resources to form a new church, but a church-planting friend of mine whose church has now done this at least three times (birthing three daughter churches) has said that each time the church sends out a group of members, the Lord fills the church back to capacity. Within just a few years, the church is ready to plant again. In fact, now those daughter churches are beginning to plant churches themselves, so the original vision of the church is seeing granddaughter churches. May God make us such fruitful churches.

A second method of planting is often referred to as the core-group model. This model was employed at the church that I had the privilege of helping plant some sixteen years ago and of which I am still the pastor. In this model, some like-minded believers, who may have been meeting together for prayer or a Bible study, determine that they would like to see whether the Lord might be pleased to plant a church among them. Often members of that core group will make contact with one of the Reformed denominations and inquire about the prospect and process of affiliating with the denomination and becoming a church plant. This method often requires a good bit of work on the part of the denominational body. Home missions committees have to exercise great discernment about the viability of such a work, what resources it will take, whether the group is really committed to the task, and often whether the group has good reason to pursue a church plant. It may be that the group has coalesced around pet theological issues or a shared sense of dissatisfaction with another church. Sometimes those reasons are sound and

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warranted, and sometimes the issues are not pet theological issues at all but simply orthodoxy. But sometimes the reasons are not sound, and great wisdom and discernment need to be exercised by home missions committees as they seek to discern the Lord's will before committing the denomination's resources and efforts to a work.

A third model of church planting has sometimes been referred to as the parachute-plant model. It is so called because it doesn't begin with any sort of core group at all other than perhaps a few contacts. Rather, a chosen and evangelistically gifted man is dropped into an area of need, where he begins to labor to see a new church plant formed. He may go door to door; he may begin advertising a Reformed Bible study; he may beat the bushes, evangelizing and trusting the Lord to give the growth. Of all the models, this is the most rare and the most dependent on having the right man for the job. But there are times when the Lord places a burden on a man's heart or a desire among the men of the presbytery to see a church planted in a place of great need. And the Lord has gifted some men with extraordinary faith and great zeal for evangelism. Think of the zeal and courage of Paul, who would just go into a city and begin talking with people at a synagogue, by a river, or at the Areopagus. Such a man might go with the financial support of his presbytery, he may go as a tentmaker like Paul, or he may go with some combination of both.

My grandfather was such a man. With the support of the church and with the undying support of my grandmother, he planted several churches throughout Southern California. The Lord would burden his heart for a city, and he would be sent out by his church to plant. He would


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often find a plot of land with a house that had a large meeting room, and he would begin a church in the house. Then when the church had grown, it would construct a church building on the property. The first role that I had with a church plant was as an associate pastor with my grandfather during the building phase of such a church plant.

One of the most crucial aspects of successful church planting is obviously having the man for the job. Not just any man will do, but the right man. Just as the right tool is important for the craftsman, the right man is important for the church plant. The right man will be one who is qualified, called, and equipped for the work, a man who first and foremost knows, loves, and fears the Lord and feels called to lead others to know Him as well. And yet in spite of his own sense of internal calling, he will not take

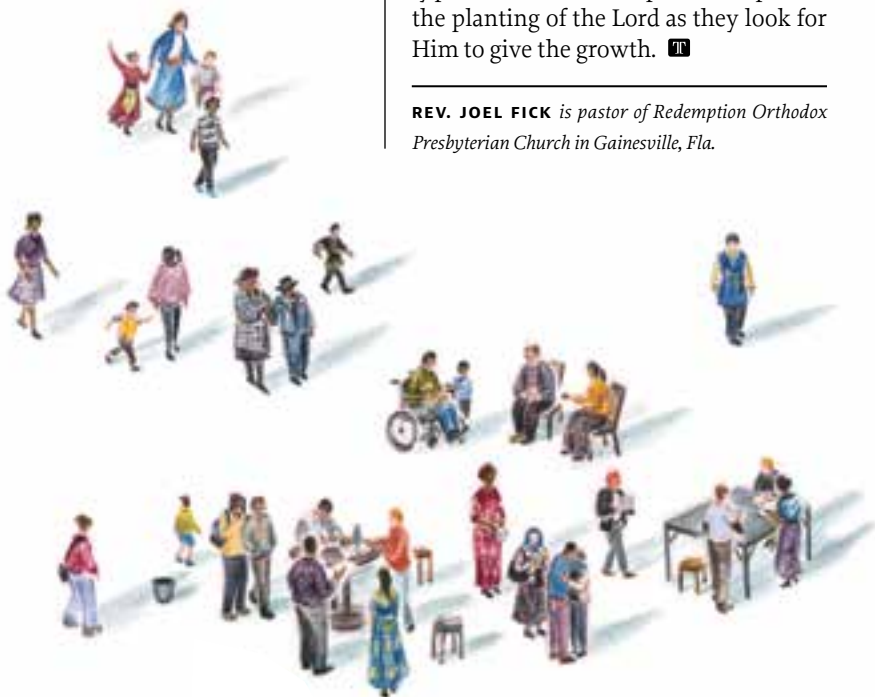
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on the work himself but will respond to the external call of God through the means of the visible church. And if he is called to the task, he must necessarily be equipped for the work. He must be led by the Spirit, trained in the Scriptures as the only rule of faith and life, able to rightly divide the Word of God, and gifted by the Lord to preach it in season and out. And he must be ready to preach the Word, thoroughly committed to making disciples of the nations, through the work of church planting.

Here, then, is the single most important thing that individual church members can do to support the work of church planting: pray that the Lord would raise up such men. Jesus said, “Pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest,” for “the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few” (Matt. 9:37–38). So we should pray for men who will faithfully plant, water, nurture, prune, and protect the planting of the Lord as they look for Him to give the growth. 

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# Challenges to Church Planting

ROLAND S. BARNES

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Our Lord told His disciples, *“On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it”* (Matt. 16:18). While the gates of hell will not prevail against the church, it is certain that the powers of hell will come against it. The Apostle Paul told the church in Ephesus, *“Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil”* (Eph. 6:11).



Thus, the church will face many and varied challenges in this world. The Lord Jesus included the planting of churches in His Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20). According to the Westminster Confession of Faith, baptism is the sacrament of admission into the visible church (28.1). When the gospel is preached and people are converted, they are then to be baptized and thereby added to the membership of a local church (Acts 2:41). The planting of new churches is what the Apostle Paul has in mind when he charges Titus with the task of appointing elders in every city on the island of Crete (Titus 1:5). The Apostle Paul viewed the planting of churches as an essential part of the

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Great Commission. Therefore, everywhere he preached the gospel, he appointed elders and organized new churches (Acts 14:21–23).

The planting of churches is establishing the kingdom of Christ amid the kingdom of darkness and thus is always a matter of spiritual warfare. What kinds of opposition or challenges do we face when we plant churches and penetrate the darkness of death and damnation with the gospel of life and redeeming love? The challenges and opposition come in a variety of forms. Some challenges are circumstantial and arise from the very endeavor of seeking to start something new, others arise from various sources of opposition that are encountered along the way, and still others are of a more personal nature.

Among the circumstantial challenges is, first, the need to find godly, gifted men who believe themselves to be called to preach the gospel and to do the pioneer work of church planting. The Apostle Paul sought out men whom he could send out to establish new churches. He had a team of co-laborers upon whom he could depend. In Philippians he mentions Timothy, a man of proven worth (2:22), and Epaphroditus, “my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need” (v. 25). Paul sent Titus to Crete to finish the work of organizing the churches there by appointing elders in every city (Titus 1:5). It is a challenge to find such men. These men must be convinced that God has called them to the task of church planting, and the church at large must be convinced that they possess that calling. They must be men who are willing to take the risks involved with starting something from scratch. As pastors and elders of Christ’s church, they need to possess a mixture of

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gifts and be able to perform a multiplicity of tasks well.

Second is the challenge of beginning a ministry with meager resources. Throughout the history of the church, many church planters have been bivocational or have sought to begin their work with barely enough money to receive a bare-bones salary. Even the Apostle Paul worked at times as a tentmaker to finance his church-planting labors (2 Thess. 3:8). Most church planters have limited financial resources. If a core group of families is seeking to start a new church, the tithes and offerings are usually not sufficient to finance a great variety of “programs.” There may not be much in the way of available facilities in which to meet. Many church plants have begun in places such as storefronts or local schools. These buildings are often not attractive, available only on a limited basis, and subject to a somewhat restricted use. The Apostle Paul often met first in the local synagogue, but after encountering opposition he had to relocate to a home, a school, or elsewhere (Acts 19:8–9). The church planter working in an unchurched area must have somewhat of a pioneering spirit as he begins a new work. He must be convinced that the Lord has called him to this work and must trust Him to provide the resources that are needed. He must be convinced that the fundamental ingredients of Word, prayer, and sacraments are sufficient to plant a new church that will honor Christ, gather the elect, and build up the body of Christ.

Third, besides the challenge of meager financial resources, there is the challenge of not having an abundance of human resources. In a small church-planting ministry that is just beginning, there are not enough people to carry on the multifaceted ministries of the established churches down the street. Often the church planter

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is the only staff person. There is no youth group, no nursery workers, and no music leader. This can be a challenge when people in the community are used to having the programs of established churches and are unwilling to do without them or to make the sacrifices that must be made to get a church plant off the ground.

In addition to circumstantial challenges, there are challenges of spiritual opposition. When Jesus said that He would build His church, He stated that “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). While the gates of hell will not prevail, there will be spiritual warfare. When a person is converted, he is “delivered . . . from the domain of darkness and transferred . . . to the kingdom” of Christ (Col. 1:13). The Apostle Peter tells us that “your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). This spiritual warfare is clearly more intense when believers seek to expand the boundaries of the kingdom of Christ by planting new churches. The new church, and especially the church planter, will encounter the challenges of spiritual warfare in many ways. This was the Apostle Paul’s experience when he preached the gospel in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:44–45). The devil has many strat-

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egies or schemes to employ to destroy the work of planting a new church. The Apostle instructs the Ephesian church, “Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil” (Eph. 6:11).

Many a church plant has been sabotaged by a spirit of jealousy, envy, bitterness, or anger. If members in the core group are self-promoters and glory seekers, the peace and unity of the fledgling church will be undermined and perhaps even destroyed. The Apostle Paul instructed Titus to confront such men to prevent them from damaging the work (Titus 1:10–11). Paul faced these challenges in Corinth and had to fight those who sought to undermine his ministry in their midst (2 Cor. 10:9–12). Some church plants grow at first but then become unhealthily inward-focused. They lose sight of their mission. They cease to lift up Christ to the community, that He might draw men to Himself.

There may be differing opinions among the members of the church plant about what the new church should look like. The church planter will have to lead the way so that the core group will develop a unity of vision and philosophy of ministry based solidly on the teachings of Scripture. In the Reformed and Presbyterian

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*Even the Apostle Paul worked at times as a tentmaker to finance his church-planting labors.*

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tradition, this means that the believers who constitute the membership of the new church must understand the biblical nature of the foundational principles and convictions of the new church. Sometimes a new church is organized too quickly, before there has been adequate time for the people to grow in their understanding of the core convictions of the new church. Sometimes there is the temptation to set Reformed distinctives aside or to water them down to make the new church appear more acceptable to a broader range of perspectives. On the other hand, there may be the temptation to make the church into a theological fortress of some sort, one that is very difficult to penetrate. The church plant must not compromise theological and foundational convictions, but it must also create an atmosphere in which people are able to ask questions, consider the teaching, and make up their minds, an atmosphere that is conducive to spiritual inquiry and growth.

Sometimes the church plant may be impatient and unwilling to wait for the Lord to raise up godly men to serve as elders and deacons. The desire to be organized quickly could lead to the selection of some who are not biblically qualified to serve as officers.

There are many and varied challenges to the work of church planting. Do not be mistaken: church planting is a spiritual endeavor. It involves spiritual warfare. It must be undergirded by prayer and spiritual discernment.

Often the church planter will experience challenges of a personal nature. He may labor long hours and see meager results. He is dependent on the Holy Spirit to change the hearts of men, but he may be tempted to employ fleshly measures to obtain the results that he wants to see. Sometimes the work will seem to drag along at an excruciatingly slow pace, and he may begin

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to doubt his calling and be overwhelmed with feelings of inadequacy. He may feel isolated, without anyone he can call on for help. When a man begins a ministry with a small group of believers with the goal of organizing a church, the progress, or lack thereof, is evident to all. It is a very different experience from that encountered when pastoring an established church, where many may come and go while the church marches on.

In addition to the personal challenges faced by the church planter himself, there is also the stress on his marriage and family. His wife and children will have to make sacrifices as they join in this pioneering work. His wife must be on board from the start, or they may be in for some difficult sailing along the way. It is often the strategy of the devil to strike the shepherd so that the sheep may be scattered (Mark 14:27).

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However many challenges there may be, the work of church planting will always be necessary and will always be worth the effort. According to a 2023 National Public Radio report, in 2019, the year before the COVID pandemic, more Protestant churches closed than opened in the United States. In addition to the churches that close every year, scores of others have so drifted away from the gospel that they have ceased to be true churches at all. Therefore, we need to be planting churches all the time. Jesus will continue to build His church, and there is no more noble endeavor than planting a new church that will promote the gospel and expand the boundaries of His kingdom. The church is the body of Christ, the bride of Christ, the temple of the living God, the household of the faith, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. The noble work of planting churches is at the heart of Christ's mission on the earth, whether at home or abroad. Find a faithful gospel minister who is seeking to plant a church that will advance the cause of Christ in this dark world. Give of your resources to finance the planting of new churches that are faithful to the Scriptures, manifest the compassion of Christ, and proclaim His saving gospel. Commit yourself to praying for and supporting godly, gifted men who are seeking to plant faithful churches. 

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**REV. ROLAND S. BARNES** *was called in 1981 to serve as the organizing pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church in Statesboro, Ga. He retired as senior pastor of Trinity in 2023.*

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# Objections to Church Planting

VICTOR CRUZ

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According to Lifeway Research, in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, about 3,000 new churches opened and 4,500 closed, continuing a decades-long congregational slide. Church experts say that these numbers increased after the pandemic, as people were reluctant to come back to in-person services.

Some pastors reported that typical church attendance is only 85 percent of pre-pandemic levels, said Scott McConnell, executive director at Lifeway Research. Research by the Survey Center on American Life and the University of Chicago found that in spring 2022, 67 percent of Americans reported attending church at least once a year, compared with 75 percent before the pandemic. According to other experts, the work of church planting is decelerating in certain regions, while many churches are closing their doors altogether. With these and other experts pointing out the church's crisis in the United States, how do we respond to the objections to church planting that we often hear when we speak about the need for planting new churches?

Planting churches has been the most effective way to advance Christ's kingdom since the time of the Apostles, but some legitimate questions

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need to be answered with care and grounded in what the Bible says about starting churches. These questions include the following: “Do we really need a new church?” “Why not just drive a little farther to go to a church in the next city?” “Aren’t there enough dying churches that need revitalization?” “Why can’t we just tell people to come here instead of planting another church?” “Can’t we just start another campus and broadcast the sermon?” “Doesn’t it weaken existing churches to send some to a new congregation?” “Wouldn’t it be better to spend our money on a new building or on global missions?”

The answer to the question “Do we really need a new church?” is obvious when we look at the data on the church’s decline. But also, we need to be faithful to God’s plan to fulfill the Great Commission. There is no doubt that church planting is God’s strategy to carry on His plan to take the gospel into the whole world and make disciples.

The first reason to not stop planting new churches is that it is biblical. In the Gospels, we find that after Peter confessed that Jesus is the Messiah, Christ responded to him, saying:

*“Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (Matt. 16:17–18)*

The meaning of these words has been discussed many times, but there is a general consensus that part of Jesus’ mission was to establish His kingdom through the church, the *ekklēsia*, the gathering of those who believe and confess with Peter that Jesus is the Savior of the world. The kingdom of God has arrived, and Christ will build His

church by the power of that kingdom. This power will be revealed by the testimony of the church’s prevailing over hell. John Calvin says:

*Jesus excited his disciples to perseverance, that though their faith was little known and little esteemed, yet they had been chosen by the Lord as the first-fruits, that out of this mean commencement there might arise a new Church, which would prove victorious against all the machinations of hell.*

Jesus appointed the church to advance His kingdom, and this is what the Apostles did in the book of Acts. Paul traveled around the Roman Empire, looking for opportunities to preach the gospel, and he found that the best way to be faithful to the gospel was to plant churches. He had in mind more than just the oral proclamation of the good news; he had a vision for local





communities where new believers would be taught what Jesus did and His will for their lives. Paul reminded his disciples not only that are they saved by grace to live a faith individually but that they belong now to the people of God.

When Jews and gentiles were converted, Paul asked them to get together for further instruction and worship. It is also important to notice that Paul's letters to the churches were meant to be read by the whole congregation and not just by the leaders. In Pauline theology, faith in Christ is always lived and experienced in community. Jesus' plan to build His church is fulfilled in the Christian gathering where the sacraments and the Apostolic teaching are ministered to the people of God.

Finally, Paul appointed leaders to take care of the new churches that had been established by the preaching of the gospel (Acts 14:21–23). The answer to the question "Do we need more churches?" is a plain yes.

We need more churches not only because the number of churches is declining but because church planting is God's strategy to make disciples of all nations.

The next two questions that we should answer, and that have much in common, are these: "Aren't there enough dying churches that need revitalization?" "Doesn't it weaken existing churches to send some to a new congregation?"

The answer to the first question is yes, many churches do need revitalization, but there is enough evidence that churches that plant churches revitalize themselves as they share their human and financial resources to start new churches.

Matt Capps, pastor of Fairview Baptist Church in Apex, N.C., gives this testimony of how he led his church into revitalization by helping to plant new churches:

*One way to revitalize and invigorate an existing church is to lead them to invest in*

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*This is a good reason to plant new churches: church planting bears more fruit in new members than making an existing church grow or broadcasting the service to other locations.*

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*God's work above and beyond themselves. In most cases, regularly giving to church plants also encourages greater generosity within the existing church. It's important then to teach your people to hold their resources with an open hand and be ready to willingly give toward God's work outside their own walls. Over the past eight years, this is how we have led our church to be involved in church planting. It's taken patience and persistence. Our financial stability strengthened as we increased in generosity. In fact, we paid off our debt in four years.*

To respond to the question “Doesn’t it weaken existing churches to send some to a new congregation?” I’ll share my experience with El Redentor Ciudad de México, the church in Mexico City that I helped plant in 2011. Since 2011, we have helped to plant two daughter churches. Our small church of 120 members gave up families and money to help these church plants. The miracle was that after we lost families and income, we received new members in the next months and our finances were balanced. This happened both times that we sent our people to plant a new church. When we see the reality of God’s presence in our mission, we need to ask, Do we rejoice in the new church that has been

established, or are we going to regret losing three or four families from our small church?

It is clear that planting new churches requires lots of faith and generous hearts, but what can we say about other options besides church planting? What about multisite churches or megachurches?

This is somewhat of a challenging question because we need to consider that Christ’s church is diverse and that He calls different people through the ministry of different churches. Multisite churches or megachurches may therefore be legitimate for a particular time or season, depending on the context—particularly an international context. Nevertheless, several studies demonstrate that the average new church gains most of its new members (60–80 percent) from the ranks of people who are not attending any worshiping body, while churches over ten to fifteen years of age gain 80–90 percent of new members by transfer from other congregations. This is a good reason to plant new churches: church planting attracts more unchurched people than does making an existing church grow or broadcasting the service to other locations.

For those who ask, “Wouldn’t it be better to spend our money on a new building or on global missions?,” I can say that a Presbyterian church that I know in the



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northwest United States has decided that it will not own a church building so that it can make better use of its resources. This church has decided to help its community by renting facilities from the school district, which is always in need of more funding. This midsize church has also committed a good amount of its income to help church plants in the United States and abroad, and it has helped plant more than ten churches in the last fifteen years. This is an example of a mission-minded church that has a vision of the kingdom for its own community. Church buildings and global missions are important, but there is always a chance to evaluate where the money can be used in a more fruitful way.

If the church in the United States will continue with its mission, it will have to plant new churches that will be able to reach out to new people. Younger adults are usually attracted to newer churches, and groups such as immigrants and ethnic minorities can be reached more easily through new churches that are purposeful about reaching out to them. New congregations must often focus on serving people outside their own ranks if they want to grow, and they may be moved to create a welcoming environment if new converts or unchurched people start attending.

Church planting can also help the established church as older leaders and congregations learn new skills, create new ministries, and produce new ideas that are needed for revitalization. In my presbytery, church-planting efforts had not been a top priority for many years. But recently the interest in what we have been doing in Mexico City has captured the attention of some leaders in my denomination, and I have been asked to make a plan to share some of our evangelistic and discipleship strategies and ways to serve the communi-

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ties where we have planted new churches. The success of new churches will make the established congregations examine and evaluate their vision, their mission, their priorities, their identity, and their faithfulness in the way they use their God-given resources.

Jesus spoke about the arrival of the kingdom of God (Matt. 4:17), and this kingdom kept growing as new people joined the community of believers and experienced the reality of God's grace and forgiveness. Church planting can keep the church as a radical and countercultural group where people are accepted regardless of their social background, gender, race, and education (Gal. 3:27–28). The new values that the Christians embraced gave birth to a new relationship between different kinds of people who experienced the unity of the faith in the gospel. The Christian values of forgiveness and love for one another created a radical dynamic that changed the culture of the Roman Empire and can change our world today. The present crisis of the church may be the calling that is needed to consider church planting as the natural response to advance the kingdom.

As we review the data about the church's situation in the United States, we can see not only that church planting is good for regions and countries that are not Christian but that we need new churches to help Christian nations remain faithful to our Savior. Church planting should not be seen as a threat to older bodies, for we do not need to choose church planting over revitalization. We naturally need new churches and older churches to have a healthy church that is always reflecting the beauty of the gospel. ■

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# Chosen in Christ

Sinclair Ferguson, Mark Johnston, and Paul Levy



June 29,  
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MAY 2024 DAILY BIBLE STUDIES

# INTO *the* WORD

## THE GOSPEL GOES TO THE NATIONS

**C**HRISTIANITY IS a truly international religion. It is not confined to a single tongue or sociocultural expression. A person does not have to learn a new language or take on a new culture to become a believer. All one must do is bow the knee to the Lord Jesus Christ, receiving Him by faith alone.

Ensuring that worship of the one true God would occur in every culture and language and not just in Jewish society and in Hebrew was God's purpose from the very beginning. After many centuries of working mostly among the Jews, the Lord began

saving gentiles in vast numbers through the preaching of the gospel. This ingathering of the gentiles in great numbers included the conversion of the gentile centurion Cornelius.

**“IF WE HAVE  
CONFESSED CHRIST  
AND PUT OUR HOPE  
AND TRUST IN HIM  
ALONE FOR SALVATION,  
THEN HE IS IN US AND  
WE ARE IN HIM....  
DO NOT LET ANYONE  
CALL YOU UNCLEAN,  
BECAUSE GOD HAS  
DECLARED YOU CLEAN.”**

—R.C. Sproul, Acts: An  
Expositional Commentary

This month, we will study Acts 10–12, which records Peter's preaching to Cornelius, the spread of Christianity to Syrian Antioch, and Peter's imprisonment by Herod Agrippa I and subsequent rescue. We will then spend a few days considering what Scripture says about the sure spread of God's Word to all nations. **IT**

### ABIDING IN THE WORD

*These verses parallel the themes of the studies each week. We encourage you to hide them in your heart so that you may not sin against the Lord:*

- Week of May 5..... ACTS 10:43
- Week of May 12..... 1 PETER 4:10
- Week of May 19..... PROVERBS 5:22
- Week of May 26..... ISAIAH 11:9

# AN ANGEL APPEARS TO CORNELIUS

**ACTS 10:1–8** “At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God” (vv. 1–2).



## CORAM DEO

*Living before the  
face of God*

God tells us that those who truly seek Him will find Him, but of course we know that a person can truly seek Him only if the Holy Spirit is drawing him to Christ. The Lord is sovereign in salvation, so we should pray that He will draw our friends and family to Himself and enable them to find Him.

### FOR FURTHER STUDY

Psalm 119:2  
Jeremiah 29:13  
John 6:44  
Romans 9:30–33

### THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

1 Kings 4–5  
Luke 23:1–25

**T**oday we return to the book of Acts and pick up our study in chapter 10. This chapter features Luke’s account of the conversion of the gentile Cornelius, one of the most significant events in the early church. Although we have already read about the conversion of one gentile—the Ethiopian eunuch (8:26–40)—that conversion did not occur under the ministry of an Apostle, and Luke does not say much more about the encounter than that the eunuch believed and was baptized in water. As we will see in our study of Acts 10, however, Cornelius’ conversion happened under the preaching of Peter, and the Holy Spirit made Himself known plainly in the episode. These factors confirmed that God was indeed going to bring the gentile nations into His church.

Luke tells us that Cornelius lived in Caesarea, an important town that featured a large Roman military presence because the Roman prefect or governor lived there. Cornelius was a centurion, an army official in charge of about one hundred soldiers, and his unit was part of a larger battalion known as the “Italian Cohort” (10:1). That God would convert him to Jesus without telling him to leave the army implies that military service can be compatible with Christian faith.

In any case, we see more significantly that Cornelius was “a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God” (v. 2). This allows us to conclude that Cornelius belonged to a class of individuals known as “God-fearers”—gentiles who believed in the God of Israel and adopted the ethics of the Jews but who did not take on the full yoke of the Mosaic law with all its ceremonial requirements. The way that Luke describes Cornelius makes it likely that he did not go up to the temple with any regularity, unlike the Ethiopian eunuch, who was also a God-fearer.

Yet remaining only a God-fearer was insufficient now that Jesus had come. Cornelius was truly seeking the Lord, but his faith was not yet completed in and through Jesus. So the Lord sent an angel to tell him to send men to the city of Joppa and request a visit from Simon Peter (vv. 3–8). God by His Holy Spirit had already drawn Cornelius close to His kingdom, for no one seeks God apart from the Spirit’s effectual work (John 3:1–8), and He was about to make the centurion a full citizen of the kingdom through the gospel. **10**

# GOD SENDS PETER A VISION

THURSDAY

2

**ACTS 10:9–16** “[Peter] saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him: ‘Rise, Peter; kill and eat.’” (vv. 11–13).

**C**ornelius sent his servants to get Peter from the city of Joppa right after being told to do so by an angel from God (Acts 10:1–8). As these servants were approaching Joppa the next day, we see in today’s passage, the Lord spoke to Peter, preparing the Apostle to receive the men from Cornelius and to return to Caesarea with them. Instead of sending an angel to speak to Peter, however, God sent the Apostle a vision.

Peter saw the vision while he was praying at about the sixth hour—that is, noon (vv. 9–10). Luke tells us that in this vision, a sheet was being let down by its four corners from the heavens, filled with “all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air.” A voice accompanied this vision, telling Peter to “rise . . . ; kill and eat.” Peter saw this sheet three times, and each time that he was told to eat the animals, he protested that he would never eat anything unclean (vv. 11–16). This helps us understand that the animals that Peter observed in the vision were unclean animals, those creatures that the Mosaic law forbade the Jews from eating (see Lev. 11).

A devout Jew, Peter responded in the way we might expect. When Peter protested, however, the Lord responded, “What God has made clean, do not call common” (Acts 10:15). Plainly, the Lord was instituting a change in the diet of His people, and yet as we will see, the change was even more thoroughgoing than that. He was signaling that He would now be bringing the gentiles, whom the Jews regarded as unclean, into the people of God en masse (vv. 34–43). The unclean animals were standing in for the unclean gentiles whom God was going to purify through faith in Jesus Christ. The many different kinds of animals may even be a picture of many different gentile nations, as many early church fathers argued.

In the days ahead, we will see just how God used this vision to bring gentiles into the church. Today, we close our study with an application to all people who are in Christ by faith alone that Dr. R.C. Sproul gives in his commentary on Acts. He writes: “God has removed your impurities from His sight and given you access into His presence. He knows the sin that remains in you, but if you have put yourself at the feet of Christ, He has embraced you and adopted you into His family. Others may call you unclean, but remember that . . . we, who by nature are unclean, have been declared clean by God. When God declares us clean, we are clean in His sight.” **TC**



## CORAM DEO

*Living before the face of God*

As Christians who continue to struggle with the presence of sin in our lives, we often feel unclean.

Of course, it is important for us to confess our sins so that we can fully enjoy our relationship with God, but we must also remember that if we have trusted in Jesus, we are clean. This allows us to come before our Creator without fear, knowing that He will receive us.

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

Jeremiah 3:17  
Zechariah 3:1–5  
1 Cor. 6:9–11  
1 John 1:7

## THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

1 Kings 6–7  
Luke 23:26–43

9:41



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## CORNELIUS' SERVANTS ARRIVE

**ACTS 10:17–23a** “Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he had seen might mean, behold, the men who were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon’s house, stood at the gate” (v. 17).

**CORAM DEO**

*Living before the  
face of God*

The gospel allows us to show hospitality to people whom we might not otherwise receive as guests. Because Jesus is the Savior of all peoples, we need not fear getting to know those who are very different from us. Doing so, in fact, creates opportunities for us to share the gospel and see people come to faith in Christ.

**FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Genesis 18:1–8  
Hebrews 13:2

**THE BIBLE IN A YEAR**


1 Kings 8–9  
Luke 23:44–56

**THE WEEKEND**

1 Kings 10–14  
Luke 24:1–35

**W**e noted in our last study that Peter’s vision commanding him to eat animals that are unclean in the law of Moses (Acts 10:9–16) was part of God’s announcement that a change was taking place in the redeemed community. No longer would the church be made up primarily of ethnic Jews as it was under the old covenant. Instead, the church under the new covenant would also include scores of gentiles as full members of the people of God. We rely mainly on Peter’s interpretation of his vision in Acts 10:34–48 to draw this conclusion definitively, but even before Peter understood what the Lord was saying, God was preparing him to comprehend the vision. For instance, the Lord’s making foods clean that were formerly unclean to the Jews means that God could also make gentiles clean even though they had been considered unclean because they were outside God’s covenant people. Many early church fathers saw significance in the fact that the sheet of animals that Peter saw had four corners. Several of them said that the four corners are related to the notion of “the four corners of the world” and thus that the sheet indicated that people from the whole world would come into the church. This is a sensible conclusion, for Christ did command us to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:18–20).

As noted, Peter did not understand his vision initially. While he was pondering what he had seen, perplexed by it, the men from Cornelius arrived at the house of Simon the tanner, where Peter was staying (Acts 10:17; see 9:43). As the men inquired after the Apostle, the Holy Spirit told Peter that He had sent the men and that he was to receive Cornelius’ servants and then go with them (10:18–20). Meeting Peter, the men from Cornelius said that an angel had sent them to the Apostle. Their reference to Cornelius’ being “well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation” (v. 22) indicates that Cornelius was well known among the Jews. It is possible, then, that Peter had heard of Cornelius before. No doubt the reference to Cornelius’ upright and God-fearing character also helped Peter welcome the men, and he likely would have begun to understand that his vision and the visit of Cornelius’ men were connected.

Apparently, it was too late in the day to travel back to Caesarea, so Peter invited Cornelius’ servants to stay the night (v. 23a). Peter, a devout Jew, could host those gentiles because Jesus brings Jews and gentiles together into fellowship. 





WEEKEND DEVOTIONAL

MAY 4–5

## NUMBER YOUR DAYS

ANDREW M. DAVIS

**H**ow can we measure the preciousness of time? How can we grasp the folly of wasting this precious gift? As the months of 2024 slip by, we are all being brought closer and closer to the day of reckoning when we will give an account of how we spent every moment to the God who gave them all to us.

Moses prayed on behalf of every generation of God's people, "Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom" (Ps. 90:12). So also, Paul pleads with us to live wisely, "redeeming the time, because the days are evil" (Eph. 5:16, KJV). The word translated "redeeming" literally means "to buy out." The Greek prefix "out" implies bondage and danger from which the time must be rescued. So does the word "redeem," for the biblical concept of redemption is of the rescue of a powerless victim from bondage, danger, or death by the payment of a price. See every day like that. Time is like David's family, taken captive from Ziklag by the Amalekites (1 Sam. 30). David had to go fight to rescue them. See every Monday, every Tuesday, every noon hour, every month of May the same way. They must be redeemed, Paul says, because "the days are evil." Without faith-filled exertion, this particular day will be lost for all eternity. Its deeds will burn like wood, hay, and straw because it was not improved for the kingdom of Christ. So, Lord, teach us all to number our days.

In a very real sense, Moses' prayer is a paradox. How can we "number our days"

properly if, as James says, we have no idea whether we'll even be alive tomorrow (James 4:14)? I think it begins with being intensely aware that our time here on earth is limited. As David cried out, "O LORD, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am!" (Ps. 39:4). It continues by believing that all the days ordained for us were written in God's book of decrees before one of them came to be, so they all have a definite purpose (Ps. 139:16). Then it extends to understanding how precious time must be if our eternity depends on our making the most of every day by trusting in Christ as Savior. It is in the fullness of time that Christ came, and at just the right time we must trust in Him. "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts" (Heb. 3:7–8). Finally, it resides in our seeing each moment of each day as a crafted gift from God never to be repeated, in which God has prepared eternally consequential good works for us to do, unique works that we can never do again once that specific moment has passed.

Dear reader, number your days properly. Redeem them by faith in Christ. Exhaust their potential by energetic labor. And look forward eagerly to a world when time will be redeemed. ■

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## PETER MEETS CORNELIUS

**ACTS 10:23b–29** “When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter lifted him up, saying, ‘Stand up; I too am a man’” (vv. 25–26).

**CORAM DEO**

*Living before the  
face of God*

Some people want to read the incorporation of the gentiles as something entirely new and contradictory to what had come before, and then apply that in a manner to claim that God is doing things today that contradict His words from the past. This is improper, for when we read God’s purposes for the gentiles in light of the entire canon, we see that God did not contradict Himself in saving the gentiles. God, in fact, never contradicts Himself.

**FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Ezekiel 16:49–50  
Matthew 4:8–10  
Jude 5–7  
Revelation 22:8–9

**THE BIBLE IN A YEAR**

1 Kings 15–16  
Luke 24:36–53

**P**eter’s meeting with Cornelius in Acts 10 shows that gentiles are to be included in God’s people, as confirmed by how the church later received the news of Cornelius’ conversion with joy (11:1–18). Clearly, something of tremendous importance had occurred, but was it something wholly new?

As we consider the full scope of biblical teaching, we see that gentiles’ coming to worship Yahweh, the Lord of Israel and one true God of all, should not be seen as entirely new or unexpected. Gentiles could be in a saving relationship with God before His covenant with Israel and the establishment of the Jews as a distinct ethno-religious group. For example, Abraham was justified before he was circumcised, while he was still a gentile (Rom. 4). Certainly, the formation of Israel and the Jewish people created a situation wherein they were the primary recipients of salvation for a time. Even under the old covenant, however, gentiles could join the people of God. They had to take on the yoke of the Mosaic law in so doing, but some gentiles, such as Ruth, were saved before the coming of Christ (Ruth 1). Finally, the Old Testament prophets foresaw a day when the gentiles would become full members of God’s people without necessarily having to adopt all the ceremonial rules of Israel. The Lord said that He would take some gentiles as priests and Levites (Isa. 66:18–21), which would require setting aside the ceremonial laws for the old covenant priesthood. Therefore, the ceremonial laws that separated Jews and gentiles were always intended to be temporary. God would, after the old covenant’s primary dealings with Israel, again not require gentiles to adopt all the Mosaic law to be His people. The extension of the gospel to the gentiles was new in that it brought them to worship the God of Israel in unprecedented numbers, but it was not new in that God had saved some gentiles before Jesus came.

In Acts 10:23b–29, Luke describes Peter’s arrival at the home of Cornelius. The gentile centurion fell at Peter’s feet, worshiping him. His response, though wrong, was understandable. Cornelius had recently seen an angel and knew that supernatural power was at work (Acts 10:1–8). He did not know any better than to think that Peter might be some kind of divine being. Peter, however, rejected Cornelius’ worship (v. 26). Matthew Henry comments, “Christ’s faithful servants could better bear to be vilified than to be deified.” **TC**

# PETER'S CONCLUSION


TUESDAY

7

**ACTS 10:30–35** “Peter opened his mouth and said: ‘Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him’ ” (vv. 34–35).

Ordinarily, ancient Jews did not “associate with or . . . visit anyone of another nation”—that is, gentiles. Peter made that remark to the gentile centurion Cornelius when he first met him (Acts 10:28–29), but he did not mean that Jews had no contact with gentiles whatsoever. Daily life in the Roman Empire would have been impossible for any Jew who never interacted with gentiles except one who lived in the remotest villages in the Holy Land. Nevertheless, Jews did limit their contact with gentiles for fear that they would somehow incur ceremonial defilement. They might meet a gentile on the street, but most Jews would not enter a gentile’s house as Peter did (v. 25).

Peter’s statement regarding Jew-gentile separation highlights the extraordinary nature of Peter and Cornelius’ meeting. Convincing the Apostle that he had done the right thing in heeding Cornelius’ request for Peter’s visit would take some explanation (vv. 21–24), and that is what we find in today’s passage. Cornelius explained the vision of the angel that he had received and the message to seek out and hear from Peter. He and several of his relatives and close friends stood ready to listen to the Apostle (vv. 30–33).

At once, Peter came to understand what was going on, for he connected Cornelius’ vision with his own vision and the Spirit’s command to go to Cornelius’ house (vv. 9–20). He replied to Cornelius that he now knew that God shows no partiality but accepts anyone who fears God and “does what is right.” Some interpreters have claimed that Peter’s statement means that doing good deeds and trusting in whatever one knows about God from nature is enough to save even if one never hears about Jesus, but that makes more of the Apostle’s comments than he intends. If Peter believed that fearing some unknown God was enough for salvation, then there’s no reason that he would go on to tell Cornelius about Jesus (vv. 34–35). Peter’s comments simply mean that God does not limit salvation to the Jewish nation but will give eternal life to anyone who truly fears Him and does what is good, the implicit assumption being that the only way to do this is through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ alone (John 14:6). Also, Peter’s words about God’s accepting those who do right are not a statement that we can merit salvation by our good works. He is simply connecting good works with true faith. Those who fear God cannot help but do good works. 



## CORAM DEO

*Living before the face of God*

Cornelius had a true fear of God that was not yet completed by knowledge of Jesus Christ. The Spirit was working in his heart to draw him to faith even before he heard the gospel, and when the Spirit is causing a person to truly seek after God, He will always make sure that the person will hear the gospel and believe. We have the honor of preaching the gospel and should engage in it, but the Holy Spirit is the One who saves souls.

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

2 Kings 5:1–17  
Isaiah 55:6  
Luke 15  
Acts 15:1–21

## THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

1 Kings 17–18  
John 1

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# PETER PREACHES TO CORNELIUS

WEDNESDAY

8

**ACTS 10:36–43** “To [Jesus] all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (v. 43).

**W**e noted in our last study that we should not take Peter’s words regarding God’s accepting those who do what is right to mean that people can merit salvation by their good works (Acts 10:34–35). This is because while good works evidence true saving faith (see James 2:14–26), our works are never in themselves perfect before we are glorified. God created us for good works, but these good works are not the basis for salvation, for the remaining presence of sin keeps our good works from being wholly pure (Rom. 7:18; Eph. 2:8–10; 1 John 1:8–9). We can please the Lord by our obedience after we have been converted to Christ, but that is because the perfect righteousness of Christ imputed to us in our justification covers the defects in our works. John Calvin comments: “Although the faithful please God after regeneration with good works, and their respects of works, yet that is not done with the merit of works. For the cleanliness of works is never so exact that they can please God without pardon; yea, forasmuch as they have always some corruption mixed with them, they are worthy to be refused. Therefore, the worthiness of the works doth not cause them to be had in estimation, but faith, which borroweth that of Christ which is wanting in works.” Westminster Confession of Faith 16.5–6 makes a similar point.

God’s sending Peter to meet with Cornelius demonstrated that the Lord seeks the salvation of gentiles as well as Jews (Acts 10:1–35), but that salvation comes only as Jews and gentiles alike hear and believe the gospel (Rom. 10:5–15). So after being introduced to Cornelius, Peter proclaimed the basics of the gospel to him (Acts 10:34–43). The Apostle in today’s passage says that Cornelius and those with him had heard of what had happened in Judea (v. 37). This must mean that they had some prior familiarity with the ministry of Jesus, perhaps from news reports brought by travelers to Caesarea. Yet the gospel consists of more than just the historical facts of Jesus’ life, ministry, death, and resurrection; it also includes an explanation of what those facts mean. Peter provides both in his preaching to Cornelius, noting what Jesus did and explaining that His work demonstrated that God had appointed Him to be Judge of the living and the dead. Consequently, the only way to receive forgiveness of sins is to believe in His name—to believe the facts about Jesus’ work and its significance (vv. 38–43). 



## CORAM DEO

*Living before the  
face of God*

Knowing the basic historical facts about Jesus is essential, but merely knowing the facts is insufficient for salvation. Saving faith also includes the interpretation that Jesus and the Apostles give of those facts—namely, that the person and work of Jesus prove that He is the Savior of the world and the only way to be reconciled to God. Accurately preaching the gospel involves proclaiming the facts of Jesus’ person and work and explaining what it all means.

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

Isaiah 52:13–53:12  
Luke 24:36–49  
1 Corinthians  
15:1–11  
1 Peter 2:24

## THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

1 Kings 19–20  
John 2

## THE GENTILE PENTECOST

**ACTS 10:44–48** “While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles” (vv. 44–45).

**CORAM DEO**

*Living before the  
face of God*

The mere application of water in the sacrament of baptism does not save anyone, and if a baptized person never trusts in Christ, then that person is never redeemed. That does not make water baptism unimportant, however. It is commanded by our covenant Lord (Matt. 28:18–20), so we cannot neglect it.

**FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Joel 2:28–29  
Malachi 1:11  
Acts 11:1–18  
Romans 6:1–4

**THE BIBLE IN A YEAR**

1 Kings 21–22  
John 3:1–21

**L**uke does not tell us explicitly that Cornelius and his friends and family trusted in Christ after Peter preached the gospel to them (Acts 10:34–43). We rightly infer that they did, however, because in today’s passage, we read that the Holy Spirit came upon Cornelius and the other gentiles who heard Peter.

The coming of the Spirit upon Cornelius and the gentiles included the gift of tongues, thus matching the experience at Pentecost when the Spirit came upon the Jews (vv. 44–46; see 2:1–4). For that reason, many commentators have referred to the descent of the Spirit at that moment as the “gentile Pentecost.” This amazed “the believers of the circumcised who had come with Peter”—Jewish followers of Jesus—for it tangibly proved that the Lord was grafting gentiles into His people. Dr. R.C. Sproul comments on the meaning of the Spirit’s falling upon those without any Jewish ancestry: “That is the significance of this Gentile Pentecost, that we are all brought in to the body of Christ.”

Additionally, the coming of the Spirit on Cornelius represents another stage in the fulfillment of Acts 1:8. Remember that this took place in Caesarea (see 10:1). Caesarea was the capital of the Roman province of Judea, and Jesus promised that the gospel, and therefore the Holy Spirit, would go from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria to the end of the earth. Jerusalem had already had its Pentecost, as had Samaria (2:1–4; 8:14–17). Now that Judea had its Pentecost with Cornelius, all that remained was for the end of the earth to have its Pentecost, which would occur in due time (see 19:1–7).

Finally, the gentile Pentecost in today’s passage says something about the necessity of water baptism. In our day, some professing Christians treat water baptism as optional, thinking that all that matters is the baptism of the Spirit. Yet while water baptism is not absolutely necessary for salvation, it is ordinarily given to all who profess faith in Christ as well as their children. We see this in today’s passage because Peter still baptizes Cornelius and the others after they had been baptized in the Holy Spirit (see 10:47–48). John Chrysostom comments, “On one occasion, when the Spirit had been poured out before the water was applied, the apostle did not stay at this point, but, as though the water were necessary and not superfluous, observe what he says: ‘Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?’” **TD**

# OPPOSITION FROM THE CIRCUMCISION PARTY



**ACTS 11:1–3** “Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, ‘You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.’”

**E**ven though the Jewish Scriptures—the Old Testament—foresaw a day when the gentiles would be brought into the people of God (Isa. 66:18–21; Mic. 4:1–5), many early Jewish Christians had some trouble with accepting gentiles as part of the fold of Christ. We see this in today’s passage, which records initial responses in the church to the conversion of the gentiles.

Not long after Cornelius and his friends and family came to faith in Jesus, news that the gentiles had believed the gospel spread throughout Judea (Acts 11:1). So when Peter went to Jerusalem, he faced criticism from the “circumcision party” (v. 2). This may not be the best translation, for Peter’s critics were likely not some kind of group that came together in a considered theological opposition to Peter. The same word translated “circumcision party” is used in Acts 10:45 simply for Jews who believed in Jesus. Likely, Peter’s critics were various Jewish Christians and not an organized body.

Why did they criticize Peter? Because he “went to uncircumcised men and ate with them” (11:3). We have noted in earlier studies that many first-century Jews avoided close contact with gentiles because they were trying to avoid the possibility of ceremonial defilement. The various Jewish parties disagreed on how much contact was allowable, but almost all of them saw eating with gentiles as taboo because that would potentially put them in closer proximity to unclean things such as food than would happen if a Jew and a gentile were just passing one another in the street. Peter’s critics were scandalized by his willingness to eat with gentiles before making sure that he would avoid ceremonial defilement.

This attitude is understandable, if not excusable. For many centuries, the Jews had been seeking to maintain ritual purity by avoiding too much contact with gentiles. The Mosaic law did not forbid eating with gentiles, so the Jews’ application of the law was not entirely correct. Still, that misunderstanding shaped their practice considerably. Even Peter was not wholly immune. While Peter ate with Cornelius, Paul would later rebuke him for avoiding table fellowship with gentile Christians at Antioch (Gal. 2:11–14).

Thus, the church in its infancy experienced what we may call “growing pains” as it strove to deal with the incorporation of gentiles into the church. It would take some time before it would become clear what exactly was required of the gentiles. **TD**



## CORAM DEO

*Living before the face of God*

The reluctance of the early Jewish Christians to fellowship fully with gentile believers was driven in part by a misunderstanding and misapplication of the Mosaic law’s statutes regarding ceremonial purity. When Scripture is misunderstood, serious problems in the church can result, which is why we must strive to comprehend God’s Word as accurately as we can.

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

Zephaniah 3:9–10  
Romans 14

## THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

2 Kings 1–3  
John 3:22–36

## THE WEEKEND

2 Kings 4–9  
John 4



## Why Is the Lord's Supper a Means of Grace?



Jonty Rhodes



3 Min Read

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WEEKEND DEVOTIONAL  
MAY 11-12

## OUR BURDEN BEARER


KARA DEDERT

**B**eeping machines, medical supplies, and hospital bags were strewn across the living room. I resented every bit of space they took up in my home and their necessity for my son's life. Lord, how do we go forward from here? Life must go on. And so my husband returned to work, the kids went off to school, and if one looked at the ticking clock, time did seem to be moving on. But I didn't know how to move with it.

The adrenaline of attending to a crisis, the outpouring of support from family and friends, and the shuffling of plans and schedules had acted as a buffer. A buffer I loved and dreaded to part with. It is after the emergency, after the long hospital stay, or when the door closes after the last visitor that the magnitude and loneliness of loss are felt. Every look at my son filled me with grief: there was the loss of progress, the loss of ability, and even more, a loss of hope for his future. If only there were a way to take his losses for him.

And isn't this the way of grief? Grief, that "weight of love" that we carry, bears witness to the value of what has been suffered or lost. Its presence settles on our shoulders and saturates every part of our being, particularly after the event, after the funeral, after the life-altering news. And even in the feeling of abandonment and loneliness, we can whisper with Jeremiah, "This I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end" (Lam. 3:21-22). Even in grief. Especially in grief. The Lord takes our losses as His own.

"Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows" (Isa. 53:4). Whether we are blindsided by grief, weary of it, paralyzed by its weight, or even sick to death of it, we are never alone in it. Our elder brother, Jesus Christ, carries not only our personal sorrows but even more, the collective grief and sorrow of His people. He knows the depth to which sin has caused suffering in the world, and He bore the curse of sin on the cross so that even our sorrows will end in restoration instead of devastation. I can scarcely bear the weight of my own grief, yet He carried the world's. He sweat drops of blood. He cried out on the cross, forsaken in His anguish, so that we would never be forsaken in ours.

We don't need to cling to grief or resist its reality. Instead, we are free to cling to Jesus through it and take courage—He carries us and personally bears our sorrows. He takes our heavy yoke and settles it on Himself and gives us His, one that is easy, light, and filled with rest (Matt. 11:28-30). And while we follow Him, He is constantly interceding for us, comforting us, and working out our everlasting joy: "And the ransomed of the LORD shall come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away" (Isa. 35:10). 

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# PETER EXPLAINS HIS ACTIONS

MONDAY

13

**ACTS 11:4–17** “I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” (vv. 16–17).

**M**any early Christians from a Jewish background had trouble with Peter’s willingness to eat with the gentile Cornelius because they believed that close contact with gentiles would render a Jewish person unclean (Acts 10:1–11:3). Peter’s actions were contrary to long-standing Jewish practice, though this practice was in many ways a misapplication of the Mosaic law. The Jewish resistance was understandable from a human perspective, but Peter wanted to make sure that the Jews understood that what he did was not contrary to the will of God. So he explained to the Jewish Christian objectors what had happened in his encounter with Cornelius, as we see in Acts 11:4–17.

Today’s passage is a short summary of Acts 10 that recounts Peter’s vision, the Holy Spirit’s command to go to Caesarea, and the Spirit’s descent on Cornelius and the other gentiles. Note verse 12 in particular, where the Apostle says that the Spirit told him to go with Cornelius’ servants to Caesarea, “making no distinction.” In other words, Peter wanted his Jewish Christian interlocutors to understand that violating traditional Jewish practice was not his idea but was a divine command. He was to go to the gentiles freely, not making a distinction between himself and them in such a way that would prevent the gospel from coming to Cornelius.

Anyone, of course, can claim that God has spoken to him. But Peter had proof for the Jewish Christians that the Spirit’s message was real. First, there was the testimony of Cornelius that an angel had appeared to him and told him to send for Peter (vv. 13–14). What Peter had heard from the Lord matched what Cornelius had heard from God. Second, Peter explained that the Holy Spirit had fallen on the gentiles, reminding them of Jesus’ promise to baptize His people with the Spirit (vv. 15–16). The same Spirit had fallen on the gentiles as had fallen on the Jewish Christians, and since Christ sovereignly pours out the Spirit, it must be that Jesus wants gentiles in His church alongside Jews. Peter simply could not refuse to admit them, and by no means could he withdraw from fellowshiping with them. To do so would be to refuse the work of the Lord Jesus Christ in sending His Spirit. To not admit them would be to stand in the way of what God was doing (v. 17; see Mark 1:8). May our churches not put up opposition to Christ’s work but rather be the Lord’s means of executing it. **TC**



## CORAM DEO

*Living before the face of God*

Peter’s words in Acts 11:17 caution us not to quickly dismiss what may be an unusual work of God. At the same time, we are not required to immediately approve of every work that claims to be from the Lord. Sober judgment is necessary, and we must evaluate all things by Scripture, taking the necessary time to discern whether something is truly from God.

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

Proverbs 20:25  
Isaiah 63:10  
Acts 5:17–42  
1 Thessalonians 5:19

## THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

2 Kings 10–11  
John 5:1–29

# REPENTANCE UNTO LIFE

**ACTS 11:18** “When [the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem] heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, ‘Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.’”



## CORAM DEO

*Living before the face of God*

Theologically, we distinguish between contrition (true sorrow for sin because it offends the Lord) and attrition (the kind of sorrow that mourns only the consequences of sin). God is not looking for perfect repentance, for as sinners we could not give it, but He is looking for the authentic recognition that our sin should be mourned because it violates His law and character.

**F**acing questions from Jewish Christians as to how Peter, a Jew, could fellowship with gentiles, the Apostle responded by recounting how God had sent him to Cornelius’ home to preach the gospel (Acts 11:1–17; see ch. 10). Peter and Cornelius’ corresponding visions and the descent of the Holy Spirit on Cornelius and his friends and family definitively proved that God was incorporating the gentiles into His covenant people. Long-standing Jewish customs of not fellowshiping too closely with the gentiles would cause further strife as the Apostles and other leaders came to a deeper understanding of what full gentile inclusion would mean for the church. Thus, it would take some time before God’s people comprehended that Jews did not have to become gentiles and gentiles did not have to become Jews to be one body in Christ. Eventually, the church would appreciate that each group can keep its customs and traditions as long as those things do not violate the gospel and as long as they are not imposed on others. The Apostles formalized this decision at the Jerusalem council, which we read about in Acts 15.

Although many of these details had not yet been worked out when Peter told the story of Cornelius’ conversion, we see in today’s passage that the Jews were being prepared to receive the Apostolic decision at the council. Once the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem heard Peter’s report about Cornelius, they rejoiced that God had given the gentiles the “repentance that leads to life” (11:18). The salvation of the gentiles provided an occasion for celebration, not mourning.

Westminster Shorter Catechism 87 defines the repentance that leads to life as “saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.” True repentance is a gift of God’s grace, which the Jewish Christians recognize in Acts 11:18. The catechism also notes that repentance unto eternal life understands that our sin is first and foremost an offense against God. Repentance requires a “true sense of sin” and “grief and hatred” of it. David shows such repentance in Psalm 51. Mere sorrow over sin’s consequences is not enough. We dare not be like Cain, who mourned only over what might happen to him because of his sin and not over how it had offended God and hurt others (see Gen. 4:1–13). **TD**

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

Job 42:1–6  
Psalm 25  
2 Corinthians 7:10  
Hebrews 12:15–17

## THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

2 Kings 12–14  
John 5:30–47

# THE GOSPEL SPREADS TO ANTIOCH

WEDNESDAY

15

**ACTS 11:19–21** “There were some [believers], men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord” (vv. 20–21).

**I**n the aftermath of the death of Stephen, one of the church’s first deacons, persecution from the Jews who rejected Jesus arose against the church (Acts 8:1–3). For the past several chapters of Acts, Luke has said little about that persecution, focusing instead on the ministry of Philip, the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, and Peter’s preaching to Cornelius and his friends and family (8:4–11:18). In today’s passage, Luke mentions the persecution of the church again, and we see that the attempts to destroy the early church had the opposite effect of providing a means for the gospel to go to even more people.

Acts 11:19 reports that the Jewish Christians who scattered from Jerusalem traveled to Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. These locations had significant Jewish populations, so they were natural places for the Jewish Christians to go for relief from suffering and to find other Jews to whom they could preach the gospel. In fact, most of these Jewish Christians at first proclaimed Jesus only to Jews, to those who were of Jewish ancestry and practiced the full scope of the Jewish law. As we read in verse 20, however, some of the Jewish Christian believers from Cyprus and Cyrene preached also to the Hellenists in Antioch.

The city of Antioch, also known as Syrian Antioch, on the Orontes River in the southeastern part of modern-day Turkey, was the third-largest city in the Roman Empire. Only Rome in Italy and Alexandria in Egypt were larger. Antioch was a truly international city, with a population made up of Greeks, Syrians, Jews, Arabs, Persians, Indians, and many others. It was also an important commercial hub where many different religions were practiced. The Hellenists who heard the gospel in Antioch were God-fearers like Cornelius, gentile monotheists who sought to worship the God of Israel and follow Jewish ethics without keeping circumcision and other ritual requirements of the Mosaic law. A great number of these Hellenists became Christians, as Acts 11:21 indicates, and note how Luke says that they believed and “turned to the Lord.” The author refers here to both faith and repentance, for one cannot turn to Jesus unless he also turns away from sin.

Because many of the Jewish Christians preached Jesus to the gentiles in Antioch, a church was born there. This church would become an important center for Paul and Barnabas’ ministry (e.g., 15:35), and it would continue to be vital for many centuries afterward, producing many theologians to guide God’s people. **TL**



## CORAM DEO

*Living before the face of God*

The Christians who first preached the gospel to the gentiles in Antioch were instrumental in birthing a church that would play a vital role for centuries afterward. Those faithful believers likely had little idea what their gospel proclamation would accomplish. We do not know what effects our faithful service to God in making disciples will have for the future. God might just use our ordinary Christian service to bless His people for generations to come.

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

Jeremiah 36:1–3  
Acts 14:24–28  
Galatians 2:11–14  
1 Thess. 1:2–10

## THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

2 Kings 15–17  
John 6:1–21

# BARNABAS BRINGS SAUL TO ANTIOCH

**ACTS 11:22–26** “Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians” (vv. 25–26).



## CORAM DEO

*Living before the face of God*

Barnabas is an excellent example of one who thought of others before himself, who was driven by humility and characterized by the Christian virtue of love, which is not envious of others (1 Cor. 13:4). We should not envy the gifts and opportunities that God gives to other believers, but we should rejoice in them and make use of them for the sake of the gospel.

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

Deuteronomy 1:38  
Proverbs 14:30  
Galatians 5:25–26  
1 Peter 4:10

## THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

2 Kings 18–19  
John 6:22–59

The news that many gentiles in Syrian Antioch were converted to faith in Christ soon reached the church in Jerusalem, as we see in Acts 11:22. It was natural for the Jerusalem church to take an interest in the growing community of believers in Antioch, for the Jerusalem Christians had just been informed of the conversion of Cornelius and because the Jerusalem church was where most of the initial Apostolic ministry had taken place (vv. 1–18). The report that “the hand of the Lord” was with the outreach to the gentiles in Antioch (see v. 21) confirmed that Cornelius’ conversion was no fluke. God was indeed bringing the nations to faith in Him, as the prophets had foreseen (e.g., see Isa. 2:1–4).

When the Jerusalem church heard of the successful ministry in Antioch, it sent Barnabas there (Acts 11:22). The early church was connectional; congregations did not seek to be independent but sought to be in ecclesiastical fellowship. Upon arriving in Antioch and seeing the “grace of God”—the evidence of the Lord’s saving work—Barnabas “was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose” (v. 23). Barnabas’ real name was Joseph, but the Apostles called him “Barnabas,” which means “son of encouragement” (4:36), and his encouraging the church in Antioch shows us how apt that name was.

The Holy Spirit blessed the ministry of Barnabas, and he soon realized that he could not continue ministering effectively to the Antiochian church alone. So he went about 150 miles away (by land) to Tarsus, where Saul went after facing threats against his life in Jerusalem (see 9:26–30). Barnabas brought Saul to Antioch, and the two ministered there for a year, teaching the church the Word of God. There in that city, believers in Jesus were first called Christians (11:25–26).

Barnabas’ willingness to call on Saul for help displayed humility. Saul was especially gifted and became an Apostle, perhaps the most important teacher in the church after Jesus Himself. Instead of envying Saul and refusing to work with him, Barnabas chose to bring him to Antioch. Matthew Henry writes: “If God by his grace inclines us to do what good we can, according to the ability we have, we ought to rejoice if others that have also larger capacities have larger opportunities, and do more good than we can do. Barnabas brought Saul to Antioch, though it might be the lessening of himself, to teach us to seek the things of Christ more than our own things.” **TC**

# SENDING RELIEF TO THE BROTHERS




**ACTS 11:27–30** “The disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul” (vv. 29–30).

**B**arnabas and Saul engaged in an effective ministry in Antioch, teaching many people there for a whole year after Barnabas brought Saul from Tarsus (Acts 11:25–26). A great need in the Jerusalem church would arise near the end of that year that would prompt Barnabas to leave Antioch for Jerusalem, as we see in today’s passage.

Luke tells us in Acts 11:27 that in those days, “prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.” Since Jerusalem is on a mountain, one always comes down from Jerusalem when traveling away from the city and one always goes up to Jerusalem when journeying to the city. In any case, one of these Christian prophets, Agabus, predicted a coming famine “over all the world,” and Luke says that this famine occurred during the reign of Claudius. This Claudius served as Roman emperor from AD 41 to 50, and during his time as the caesar, many natural disasters and food shortages plagued the Roman Empire. Because of this, it can be difficult to pinpoint the exact date of the famine to which Luke refers. Probably it took place in about AD 45. Agabus gave his prediction sometime before that, for the Lord was preparing His people for the suffering that lay ahead.

When the Christian disciples in Antioch heard about this famine, they apparently understood that the disaster would particularly afflict the believers in Jerusalem. As we see in Acts 11:29–30, the disciples decided to send financial relief to Judea, each person giving to help the church in Jerusalem “according to his ability.” The Antiochian church sent Barnabas and Saul to carry these funds to Jerusalem.

Importantly, the leaders in Antioch did not compel this giving; it came naturally and voluntarily as the believers were led by God to show love to the believers in Judea. The Christians in Antioch, though far from Jerusalem, understood themselves to be connected to the church in Jerusalem, and they knew that they could not just leave their brothers and sisters in Christ to starve. The giving of the gentile Antiochians to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem powerfully demonstrated the unity of the church, and later in his ministry Paul would take up another collection from the gentile churches for the church in Jerusalem (see 2 Cor. 9). Ethnic differences did not keep Jewish and gentile Christians from loving and serving one another in the early church. The gentiles’ giving testified to the peace that Jesus brings between people. 



## CORAM DEO

*Living before the  
face of God*

Dr. R.C. Sproul writes in his commentary, “A commitment to the real gospel of salvation carries along with it a commitment to the material welfare and well-being of people.” The gospel indeed is a spiritual message, but gospel ministry is not content simply to declare the truth and to leave suffering people to fend for themselves. As Christians, we are to show love to the whole person, both the body and the soul.

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

Ruth 2  
Romans 15:22–29

## THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

2 Kings 20–22  
John 6:60–71

## THE WEEKEND

2 Kings 23–1 Chron. 2  
John 7:1–52



WEEKEND DEVOTIONAL

MAY 18–19

## SUFFERING MATTERS

JONATHAN L. MASTER

**N**one of us likes to suffer. We avoid it whenever we can, and we go to great lengths to diminish whatever suffering we have to endure.

If we are honest with ourselves, though, we must acknowledge that times of suffering contribute to our growth. In school, the challenging classes teach us the most; rigorous training makes for better athletic performance; and the most elite soldiers are the ones whose training is the most demanding. We insist that our doctors, soldiers, and teachers have the most challenging training because we know that the suffering they endure will prepare them well for whatever work they are later called on to do.

It should not surprise us that the Bible has much to say about the value of suffering. Suffering is a part of the human experience. Suffering as a Christian shows the reality of our faith and displays God's power in us (2 Cor. 12:9–10; 1 Peter 1:6–7). It is an incredible testimony of the gospel's power when Christians persevere in faith despite immense trials. God is with us as we endure (Ps. 34:19; Isa. 43:2).

When it comes to unjust persecution, we can also be confident. Persecution is something that Christians should expect (1 Peter 4:12–13). Paul says that it will happen to “all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:12).

Struggles and trials—whether through persecution or through the normal struggles of living in a fallen world—can even be a cause for rejoicing. They produce steadfastness and hope (James 1:2–4). The Apostle Paul spoke to this in Romans 5, writing:

*Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (vv. 3–5)*

Suffering is indeed a mysterious part of our experience as human beings. We cannot know why God, in His wisdom, chooses some to endure great hardship. But there is an even greater mystery. Not only is suffering the means that God uses to change us and cause us to grow by His Spirit, but the suffering of Jesus Christ on our behalf is also the mysterious way that God deals with our sin and reconciles us to Himself. Our suffering points us to His suffering. “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit” (1 Peter 3:18).

None of us wants to suffer. But it is through suffering and struggle that we grow. God is with us as we suffer. And Jesus Christ, the Son of God, accomplished our redemption through enduring suffering on our behalf, so that we can look forward to the day on which all our tears will be wiped away by Him. ■

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# PETER IN PRISON

MONDAY


20

**ACTS 12:1–5** “Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church” (v. 5).

**H**aving described the start of the church in Syrian Antioch after Jewish Christians fleeing persecution preached the gospel there (Acts 11:19–26), Luke turns to focus on some events in Jerusalem, where the persecution of the church originated after the death of Stephen (see also 8:1–3). Stephen, one of the seven appointed to serve in chapter 6, was the Apostolic church’s first martyr, but as we see in today’s passage, he was not the last.

Acts 12:1 tells us, “Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church.” This was Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great, whom the Roman emperor Caligula appointed king over the Jews in AD 37 and who reigned over Herod the Great’s full territory from AD 41 to 44. Herod Agrippa I had a close relationship with the Pharisees and sought to remain in the good graces of the Sadducees, who controlled the temple and Jewish priesthood. No doubt, he helped facilitate the persecution of the church after Stephen’s death to please the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Verse 2 indicates that Herod had “James the brother of John” killed with the sword. This James was not the brother of Jesus but the son of Zebedee and brother of the Apostle John (see Matt. 4:18–22). He was the first Apostle to be martyred for the faith, giving us an example to follow of one who lost his life because he wanted to save it, for Jesus said that those who are faithful to the gospel even if it means death ultimately gain eternal life (Luke 9:24). This is not because martyrdom earns our salvation but because it demonstrates the authenticity of our faith, through which we lay hold of salvation. In dying for Christ instead of renouncing Him, James demonstrated Christian courage and gave us more confidence of the Lord’s truth. Matthew Henry comments, “The first preachers of the gospel were so well assured of the truth of it that they sealed it with their blood, and thereby have encouraged us, if at any time we are called to it, to resist unto blood too.”

Herod persecuted not only James but also the Apostle Peter. As Luke notes in Acts 12:3–5, Herod had Peter arrested once he saw that killing James pleased the Jews. The king put four squads of soldiers in charge of Peter, a total of sixteen troops, being unwilling to put the Apostle to death until after Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. As Jesus had promised, evil men were hating His servants because of Him (Luke 21:17). 



## CORAM DEO

*Living before the face of God*

James the son of Zebedee went to death instead of renouncing Christ, leaving for us an example to follow. When we are willing to suffer for Christ, whether that suffering involves something as minor as being mocked or as severe as being martyred, we are faithful to the Savior and we encourage others who love Him to do the same if they are ever persecuted for their faith.

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

2 Kings 9  
Daniel 6  
Hebrews 11:35–40  
Revelation 12:11

## THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

1 Chronicles 3–5  
John 7:53–8:11





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## AN ANGEL RESCUES PETER

**ACTS 12:6–11** “When Peter came to himself, he said, ‘Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting’” (v. 11).


**CORAM DEO**

*Living before the  
face of God*

The church did not give up when Peter was arrested but fervently prayed for God to rescue the Apostle. When the church is under attack in our own day, we may be tempted to think that nothing can be done to rescue us, and we can grow discouraged in prayer. Yet we must press on in intercession, asking the Lord to rescue us, knowing that He may use our prayers to bring relief to His people.

**D**uring the persecution that came against the church after the martyrdom of Stephen, Herod Agrippa I arrested the Apostle Peter. This occurred during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which the first-century Jews had come to merge with the Feast of Passover (Acts 11:19–12:3). At first, Herod only imprisoned the Apostle, not wanting to disturb the festivities of Passover and purposing to hand down Peter’s sentence after the holiday. Clearly, Herod did not want Peter to escape, for he went to great lengths to keep him confined. He ordered four squads, totaling sixteen soldiers, to guard Peter (v. 4). This severe trial for the church, in turn, prompted the believers in Jerusalem to fervently pray for Peter’s release (v. 5). By this, they left a good example for Christians in every generation. When the church finds itself under siege, we dare not resign ourselves to continuing forever as a persecuted minority. Instead, we are to pray fervently, knowing that God delights to work in and through our intercession to relieve the suffering of His people. Matthew Henry comments, “Times of public distress and danger should be praying times with the church; we must pray always, but then especially.”

Today’s passage gives us further details regarding what Herod did to make sure that Peter could not escape. The Apostle was bound between two soldiers—he was chained to two different men—and sentries were placed at the prison to guard him (v. 6). One might think that all these guards would trouble Peter, that the evident danger that he was in would have rendered him sleepless with worry. Yet Peter was fast asleep the night before he was to stand before Herod (v. 6). His trust in the Lord was so secure that like David many centuries earlier, Peter could sleep peacefully as his enemies threatened him (see Ps. 4).

So soundly did Peter sleep that when God sent an angel to rescue him, the angel had to strike him rather hard to rouse him. Miraculously, Peter’s chains fell off, and he was able to follow the angel out of the prison and back on to the streets of Jerusalem (Acts 12:7–10). Apparently, the Apostle was in a bit of a daze through all this, for he did not fully recognize what the Lord was doing until he was out of the prison. Much later, he could see that God had rescued him from his enemies (v. 11). 

**FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Psalm 91  
Acts 16:16–40  
2 Timothy 4:18  
2 Peter 2:4–10

**THE BIBLE IN A YEAR**

1 Chronicles 6–7  
John 8:12–38

# PETER REUNITED WITH THE CHURCH

WEDNESDAY

22

**ACTS 12:12–17** “[Peter] described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, ‘Tell these things to James and to the brothers.’ Then he departed and went to another place” (v. 17).

**O**n the eve of standing before Herod Agrippa I to be tried and sentenced for following Jesus, Peter slept peacefully because he trusted in the Lord’s good providence. That same night, God sent an angel to free him from prison, and the Apostle escaped the guard that Herod had placed to keep him behind bars (Acts 12:1–11). It was time for Peter to be reunited with the church that had been praying for him fervently (v. 5).

Luke tells us the story of this reunion in today’s passage. Peter went to the house of a woman named Mary, where many of the Christians in Jerusalem were praying (v. 12). The earliest Christians in Jerusalem attended synagogue meetings and even the temple, and following the practice of their Jewish ancestors, they also gathered in homes for prayer and fellowship with other believers. Mary was likely a wealthy woman because only those with some means owned houses large enough for many Christians to gather. Thus we see that the Christian church from the start had members of every economic status. Luke does not mention the name of Mary’s husband, which probably indicates that she was a widow. Furthermore, Mary was the “mother of John whose other name was Mark.” This John Mark later worked alongside Barnabas and Saul (12:25), and eventually those two men separated when they disagreed about Mark’s usefulness in ministry (15:36–41). Years afterward, John Mark wrote the gospel of Mark, his primary source being the Apostle Peter.

That Mary had some wealth is confirmed by the fact that she had at least one servant, a girl named Rhoda, who answered the door when Peter came knocking (12:13). Rhoda was so overjoyed when she heard Peter’s voice that instead of opening the door, she ran back to the people gathered inside to tell them that Peter was there. They did not believe her, and when she insisted that it was Peter, they said that it was his angel, reflecting a Jewish belief that some people had their own angelic guardians (vv. 14–15). Their disbelief that it could be the Apostle implies that they had essentially given up hope that they would see Peter again even though they had been praying for his release. When we pray, God may do more than we expect.

Peter’s reunion with the Jerusalem church was brief, for he needed to get away from Herod. The Apostle instructed the believers to let James know what had happened (vv. 16–17). This was James the brother of Jesus, a key leader of the Jerusalem church. **11**



## CORAM DEO

*Living before the  
face of God*

God’s church includes all kinds of people, including both the very wealthy and the very poor. From the beginning, wealthy individuals such as the Mary mentioned in today’s passage have worshiped Christ alongside those of little means.

No one is to be excluded from the church on the basis of wealth or social status, for all who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ are one people in Him.

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

Proverbs 22:2  
Ecclesiastes 5:19  
James 2:1–13  
1 Peter 5:13

## THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

1 Chronicles 8–10  
John 8:39–59

## HEROD LASHES OUT

**ACTS 12:18–19** “When day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there.”


**CORAM DEO**

*Living before the  
face of God*

Herod turned on his sentries and had them executed when they did not keep Peter from escaping. Allying with other people against the Lord is foolish not only because the Lord cannot be defeated but also because those who seem to be allies can quickly turn against one another. To oppose God will put us at odds not only with Him but also with other people.

**R**evelation 12 gives us a picture of the spiritual realities that lay behind the history of God’s people. John receives a vision of the dragon, that ancient foe of the Lord and His people. This is Satan, who has sought to destroy the Messiah and those who serve Him. Having failed to defeat Jesus and prevent His ascension to the right hand of God, Satan was cast down to earth and, until Jesus returns, goes about in great wrath, knowing that his defeat is sure and his time is short (v. 12).

Throughout the history of the church, this wrath has often manifested itself in the persecution of Christians, and we have been reading about the suffering of the church in the Jewish authorities’ persecution of the earliest followers of Jesus after the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1–3; 12:1–17). As we have seen, however, this persecution did not wipe out the church. In fact, as a result of the persecution, many Christians fled to Antioch in Syria, and a church was started there because these believers continued to preach the gospel and make disciples (11:19–26). In God’s providence, what the Jewish opposition meant for evil, the Lord meant for good (see Gen. 50:20). The church actually grew under persecution; it did not shrink. This led the early church father Tertullian to write the famous line, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” We have to be careful about making this an absolute principle that is true everywhere that the church suffers. Some parts of the world where the church has experienced opposition from authorities have much lower Christian populations now than before persecution arose. Nevertheless, Tertullian’s line points us to a key truth—namely, that the church will continue to endure throughout history until Jesus returns (Isa. 54:17; Matt. 16:18).

When the devil’s attacks against the church do not succeed, he tends to lash out (Rev. 12:12), even taking out his ire on his own servants as part of God’s judgment against those who ally with Satan against His people. We see this in today’s passage, where we read that Herod put to death those who had been guarding Peter because they let the Apostle escape (Acts 12:18–19). Those soldiers no doubt thought that they had chosen wisely by allying with Herod, but the Lord brought them to an end by their evil designs. Matthew Henry comments, “When the wicked are thus snared in the work of their own hands, the Lord is known by the judgments which he executes.” 

**FOR FURTHER STUDY**

2 Kings 19:32–37  
Proverbs 5:22  
Ecclesiastes 8:10–13  
1 Peter 5:8

**THE BIBLE IN A YEAR**

1 Chronicles 11–13  
John 9:1–23

# THE CONSEQUENCES OF NOT GLORIFYING GOD



**ACTS 12:20–23** “Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last” (v. 23).

**T**he wickedness of Herod Agrippa I caused great suffering for the early church. We have seen that this evil man killed one of the original twelve disciples of Jesus, James the son of Zebedee. He also had Peter imprisoned, though an angel freed that Apostle. Even those who obeyed Herod and participated in the king’s evil could not escape the king’s wrath, for after Peter’s escape Herod killed the soldiers who had guarded the Apostle (Acts 12:1–19).

For many years, Herod sinned with apparent impunity, but as we see in today’s passage, he finally received divine judgment for his transgressions. A dispute between the Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon provided the occasion for Herod’s demise. These cities depended on Herod’s territory for economic prosperity and even for a great deal of the food needed to feed their populations because goods for those cities made their way through the ports that Herod controlled. Herod could easily disrupt the economies and well-being of Tyre and Sidon by rerouting trade to certain ports, so when the two cities got into a heated disagreement, they willingly looked to him to settle the argument lest he somehow cut off their food supply (v. 20).

Tyre and Sidon came to an agreement and Herod gave a speech to mark the occasion, receiving great acclaim from those who heard it. They even said that they were hearing from a god and not from a man (vv. 21–22). The ancient Jewish historian Josephus also tells us about this episode, his account paralleling Luke’s record, and he states that the people who heard Herod claimed that his words were greater than those of mere mortals. Like Luke, Josephus also reports that Herod suddenly fell ill after giving the speech and died a painful death. Luke, inspired by the Holy Spirit, is able to provide us with the insight that Herod fell ill because an angel struck him, punishing him for failing to “give God the glory” (v. 23). We do not know exactly what disease Herod contracted when the angel struck him, but we do not need that information to grasp the point—when people allow themselves to be acclaimed as deity, they risk being subject to divine judgment.

Herod Agrippa I for a time could persecute the church, but his time opposing the Lord’s people was short. Ultimately, no foe of the people of God can endure forever because the Lord will not fail to rescue His children (2 Tim. 4:18). **TC**



## CORAM DEO

*Living before the face of God*

The enemies of Christ may temporarily succeed in inflicting great harm on the church. No foe of God and His people can ultimately prevail, however. The Lord will finally bring the power of His foes to an end. Our call is to remain faithful to His Word, trusting Him to give relief to His church in His time.

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

Nahum 1  
Revelation 18

## THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

1 Chronicles 14–16  
John 9:24–41

## THE WEEKEND

1 Chronicles 17–20  
John 10



WEEKEND DEVOTIONAL

MAY 25-26

# BEWARE THE COUNTERFEITS

R. CARLTON WYNNE

**D**o you remember the classic spy thriller scene where the hapless protagonist sets down a briefcase full of priceless jewels at an airport or train station, only to pick up a different but similar-looking briefcase next to him? Before he knows it, the evil villain who planted the counterfeit has absconded with his treasure.

I call this to mind because it reflects one of Satan's most persistent strategies for weakening Christians' allegiance to Christ. He substitutes a counterfeit version of what we treasure, of what God calls us to, and of what God says to us. Satan did this to Adam and Eve after God created them as His image bearers (Gen. 1:27). In effect, Satan suggested that they rely on their own wisdom to assess what was good or evil (see 2:17). They were called to be "like God" by mirroring His righteousness and holiness on earth, but the tempter lured them to be "like God" in a counterfeit sense, telling Eve that by eating of the forbidden tree, she and Adam could be "like God, knowing good and evil" for themselves (3:5). Instead of imitating God as beloved children by submitting to His word, our first parents usurped God's prerogative to define what is good. In this, Adam and Eve imitated the father of lies rather than their Father in heaven.

After the fall, Paul reminded the Corinthians that Satan still presents counterfeits. He warned that false teachers were proclaiming "another Jesus than the one we proclaimed," offering "a different gospel" from the one they received in faith (2 Cor. 11:4)—and in that offer they were being duped. The Apostle warned that "as

the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning," the believers at Corinth could be easily "led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ" (v. 3).

Where does Satan entice believers with counterfeits today? Everywhere. In the wider world, the devil rejoices over the redefinitions of *love, tolerance, inclusion, and affirmation* that threaten to lead Bible-believing Christians astray. The temptation is especially strong for young believers to "ally" themselves to the latest cultural movement. But even mature Christians are not immune from picking up the wrong briefcase. Satan entices churches to indulge moral laxity as a false imitation of God's grace or to implement harsh and unloving discipline in the name of righteous zeal. Christian husbands can be tempted to counterfeits of sexual intimacy on their phones, while wives can fall for imitations of the perfect life on social media or in magazines. Only constant exposure to what is genuine, holy, and true in God's written Word will enable us to spot and flee from the counterfeits that Satan places in our path.

Praise God that by His grace we can escape Satan's capture through the gift of repentance (2 Tim. 2:26). But beware: even though by His cross Christ has defanged the devil, he still prowls around for a meal (1 Peter 5:8). Let us heed Scripture's warning to not be "ignorant of his designs" (2 Cor. 2:11). **■**

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**DR. R. CARLTON WYNNE** is associate pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Atlanta and adjunct professor of systematic theology at Reformed Theological Seminary.



# THE INCREASE OF GOD'S WORD

MONDAY

27

**ACTS 12:24–25** “The word of God increased and multiplied. And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark.”

**G**od’s Word will certainly go forth to the nations and persevere against all opposition. Acts 10–12 demonstrates this, for in these chapters we have seen the gospel bring conversion, inspire opposition, and survive the many threats raised against it.

In Acts 10 and 11, Luke recorded how the gospel began its powerful advance beyond the boundaries of ethnic Israel into the gentile world with the conversion of many people who had never taken on the full yoke of the Jewish law. Cornelius, his friends and family, and many of the God-fearers in Syrian Antioch surprised Peter and other Jews with how readily they believed the gospel and received the Holy Spirit. The message of Jesus Christ could not be confined to one nation but had to break down ethnic and national boundaries as the church fulfilled Jesus’ commission to make disciples of all nations (see Matt. 28:18–20).

Additionally, Luke’s account has shown us how the gospel invites opposition. Acts 12:1–19 describes some of the suffering that the early church endured. James the son of Zebedee was martyred and the Apostle Peter was imprisoned but later rescued by an angel. Sinners will try to suppress the gospel whenever it is faithfully proclaimed. Sometimes the world will put believers to death, but at other times the church will escape, and we must be prepared for either result.

Peter’s escape from prison demonstrates how the gospel will endure and continue to spread even when the church suffers persecution, and the death of Herod Agrippa I shows that the gospel will persevere despite all opposition. Herod had tried to put an end to the gospel, but the Lord struck him dead and the gospel endured (vv. 20–23). Any success that the world may seem to enjoy as it fights the people of God can be only temporary. Ultimately, the church will prevail as it battles the kingdom of darkness (Matt. 16:18).

Luke summarizes all these truths and the scope of the narrative in Acts 10–12 by stating that “the word of God increased and multiplied” (12:24). But the advance of the gospel was just getting started. Luke also reports that Barnabas, Saul, and John Mark returned from their mission to carry financial relief to Jerusalem (v. 25). They would not be back in Antioch for long but were about to embark on a significant missionary journey. 📖



## CORAM DEO

*Living before the face of God*

It can be easy to look at the state of the church and the world and to think that the gospel is not advancing and persevering through all opposition. Yet we have the sure promise of Christ that His gospel will conquer the gates of hell, and we have the record of this promise’s coming true throughout church history, beginning in Acts. Let us be encouraged that God’s gospel cannot fail, and let us trust the Lord to bless our gospel proclamation.

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

Proverbs 12:19  
Isaiah 40:8  
Acts 19:20  
2 Timothy 2:8–9

## THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

1 Chronicles 21–23  
John 11:1–27

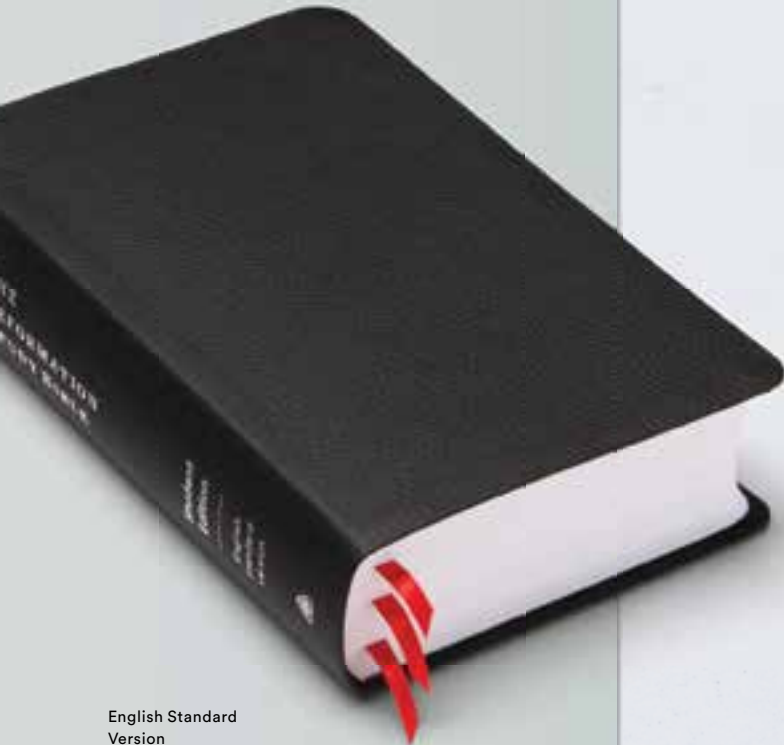
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## THE WORD FILLS THE EARTH

**ISAIAH 11:1–9** “They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (v. 9).


**CORAM DEO**

*Living before the  
face of God*

One of the things that had to happen with the coming of the Messiah was the expansion of the knowledge of God to the ends of the earth. The Lord is using His church to accomplish this, and our participation in the church’s disciple-making work allows us to play a role in God’s fulfilling His promises. It is a privilege and honor to support the effort to take God’s Word to the whole world.

**A**gainst the opposition of Herod Agrippa I and others, the Word of God increased in the early years of the church. The gospel spread, converting Jews and gentiles to faith in the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 11–12). This should not surprise us, for the Scriptures are clear that God’s truth cannot be contained or ultimately suppressed. Many passages testify to the sure expansion of the Word of God across the earth, making the extension and success of special divine revelation a worthy theme for us to consider at this point in our study of the book of Acts. We will look at a few key texts outside Acts over the next few days to see how Scripture assures us that divine truth will certainly spread to the ends of the earth, taking root where He has ordained it under His sovereign reign.

Today we are looking briefly at Isaiah 11:1–9, a key passage that promises the sure expansion of God’s Word to the ends of the earth. This well-known text features a prediction of the Messiah and His empowerment by the Holy Spirit to rule in all wisdom and godliness. Isaiah speaks of a shoot from the “stump of Jesse” (v. 1). Jesse was the father of King David (1 Sam. 16), and the reference to him as a stump in Isaiah’s prophecy foresaw that the regal line descended from him would fall, much as a tree can be cut down. Yet the root and stump of Jesse would not pass away after David’s sons lost the throne in the exile. The throne would be restored to David, beginning again in humble renewed growth, like a shoot emerging from a stump. Ultimately, this was fulfilled in the first advent of the Lord Jesus Christ, the promised Son of David born in humble circumstances but exalted to the right hand of God the Father Almighty (e.g., see Rom. 1:1–4).

The Messiah, we see in Isaiah 11:2–5, must rule in righteousness, fully equipped by the Spirit. Moreover, His reign will bring peace and harmony to creation (vv. 6–8). This has begun in the church but will be most fully realized when Jesus returns to bring the new heaven and earth. Furthermore, the exercise of the Messiah’s rule will result in the earth’s being full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (v. 9). Knowledge of the Lord comes through His Word, so we see here a vision of God’s Word being known throughout the whole world. God has ordained that all peoples know His Word, and today the missions work of the church around the world is the means by which the Lord is bringing His predictions to pass. 

**FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Psalm 67  
Habakkuk 2:14  
Matthew 24:14  
Romans 16:25–27

**THE BIBLE IN A YEAR**


1 Chronicles 24–26  
John 11:28–44

**MARK 4:1–20** “Those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold” (v. 20).

**I**saiah 11:1–9 assures us that the knowledge of the Lord will fill the earth as the waters cover the sea. His special revelation, the Holy Scriptures, will be known in every place, for we cannot know God truly without the full unveiling of His character and His plan of salvation as given in His Word (Rom. 10:14–17). Since the first advent of Christ, the Word has gone forth, and while there are regions and people groups that have yet to hear the message of the one true God, the gospel has been proclaimed in many places.

We know, however, that not everyone who has heard the Scriptures faithfully taught comes to faith. What accounts for this? In the parable of the soils, Jesus explains that a person’s response to the Lord’s truth depends on that person’s heart.

Before we consider the parable and its explanation, let us first consider Jesus’ comment on the purpose of parables that He gives before interpreting for the disciples the various kinds of soils. Quoting Isaiah 6:9–10, our Lord notes that He speaks in parables to veil the truth from some people (Mark 4:10–13). The Word of God always accomplishes the purpose He has for it (Isa. 55:10–11), but that purpose is not always salvation. Some people harden their hearts against the Lord’s truth when they hear it, and this occurs under God’s sovereign will. In other words, God has not failed or erred when people reject His Word; rather, this rejection is included in His overall plan for creation.

In the parable, Jesus draws an analogy between people’s different responses to the Word and four different kinds of soils. Some hearts are so hardened that the gospel does not penetrate at all and Satan quickly steals it away from them, as birds eat up seed that cannot take root in the compacted soil of footpaths. Other people may show an initial response of joy, but persecution causes them to fall away because the heart was not sufficiently fertile to allow the gospel to take full root. Still others have hearts that seem to receive the gospel and produce some yield, but the cares of life choke out growth just as thorny weeds can smother healthy plants. Their hearts are not singularly committed to God and His ways but are more preoccupied with the cares of life. Finally, many people who hear the Word yield much spiritual fruit because the gospel takes deep, permanent root in their hearts, as plants get firmly established in good soil. Such hearts are the gift of the Lord to us in regeneration (Mark 4:1–9, 14–20; see Ezek. 36:26; John 3:1–8). 



## CORAM DEO

*Living before the  
face of God*

The Word of God will not take root in those whose hearts are hardened against the Lord. Thus, we should pray that God will keep our hearts soft and ready to receive His truth and to bear fruit accordingly. Let us also pray for our friends and family so that they will hear God’s Word with faith and persevere therein.

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

Psalm 95  
Proverbs 28:14  
Matthew 13:1–23  
2 Corinthians 3

## THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

1 Chronicles 27–29  
John 11:45–57

# THE GROWTH GOD GIVES TO HIS WORD

**1 CORINTHIANS 3:1–9** “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth” (vv. 6–7).



## CORAM DEO

*Living before the face of God*

As servants of God, we have the high privilege and responsibility of taking His Word to the nations. At the same time, we are but servants and cannot take credit for how His Word does its work. Let us be faithful to help people know Scripture, discipling others where God has placed us, but let us also remember that the Lord blesses our efforts as He sees fit.

### FOR FURTHER STUDY

Psalm 119:25  
Isaiah 52:10  
Micah 4:1–5  
Luke 17:7–10


### THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

2 Chronicles 1–3  
John 12:1–19

Continuing our look at the sure spread of the Word of God throughout the entire world, we come today to an important passage regarding how the Lord works through His church to establish His revelation in the hearts of people and to cause it to flourish. As we saw in Mark 4:1–20, the gospel cannot take root in people and save them unless their hearts are good soil—unless the Lord has granted them new hearts to believe His truth (see also Ezek. 36:26; John 3:1–8). Regeneration—God’s granting of a new heart—is the work of the Lord alone (a truth known as *monergism*), but that does not mean that His servants play absolutely no role in the Lord’s transformation of people by His Word.

The context of 1 Corinthians 3:1–9 is factionalism in the first-century church of Corinth. Church members were rallying behind their favorite Christian leaders and getting into arguments with one another, thinking that they had to side with particular teachers against others. There is no evidence that these leaders actually countenanced this behavior, but immature believers engaged in it nevertheless. Paul addressed this issue by saying that as useful as he, Apollos, and other ministers are, in the end they are not responsible for the spiritual awakening and growth of the Christian community. They are but servants; the harvest and yield of spiritual growth come from God alone.

Paul relativizes the importance of Christian ministers to point us to the Lord as the source, sustainer, and consummator of spiritual life by His Word. Yet we should not think that he makes the servants of God unimportant in doing so. As we see in verse 6, with respect to the Corinthians, Paul planted and Apollos watered. Paul preached the gospel to the Corinthians initially, delivering to them the Word of God (Acts 18:1–11). Apollos came later and provided further instruction in the Scriptures (19:1). These activities were important and the means by which our Creator communicated His saving truth to the Corinthians and built them up in the faith. In fact, the ordinary way that the Lord saves and builds people up is through the work of the church in teaching people to obey all that Christ has commanded (Matt. 28:18–20).


Nevertheless, while God uses His people to take His Word to the ends of the earth, He alone gives life through the Word. As Paul says, “Only God . . . gives the growth” (1 Cor. 3:7). 

**1 PETER 1:22–25** “You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God” (v. 23).

**S**urely the Lord will cause His Word to reach the ends of the earth so that knowledge of Him exists in every place (Isa. 11:1–9). This Word will take root in hearts that are good soil, fertile and enabled by Him to receive the gospel (Mark 4:1–20). God will use His servants to proclaim the gospel and enable His people to develop an ever-deeper understanding of His truth. Nevertheless, the spiritual growth obtained through this Word comes only from Him (1 Cor. 3:1–9). These truths help us understand that there is a primacy to the Word of God in the church and in the Christian life. If we are not dedicated to the Scriptures as individuals and as the corporate body of Christ, we cannot thrive in our relationship with God.

Today we are concluding our brief look at the sure expansion of God’s Word by considering the permanent effects in the lives of the Lord’s children. If the Word of God brought people into His kingdom only temporarily, then the extension of the gospel to all nations would not be good news. To gain citizenship in the kingdom of the Lord only temporarily before losing it is no ultimate gain at all. Thankfully, as we see in today’s passage, all those who are truly born again are born of an imperishable seed “through the living and abiding word of God” (1 Peter 1:23).

Peter quotes Isaiah 40:7–8 in his argument that we are born of imperishable seed. In the original context, Isaiah is referring to the announcement of the good news of the end of exile, that God would surely bring His people back from Babylon, forgive their sins, and renew them with His strength. This was a sure word that could not perish, God’s promise of salvation that would certainly be accomplished. By extension, of course, this reference to the permanence of God’s promise of the return from exile is true for all of God’s promises, but it has special import for His promise of redemption.

The gospel tells us that Jesus Christ is the One who brings about the end of exile for sinners, who restores us to a right relationship with God after having been cast out of His blessed presence because of our sin. This word from God cannot fail because it is the fulfillment of the promise in Isaiah about the end of Judah’s exile, that imperishable word given to the people of God. Everyone who actually trusts in the gospel has been born again by the Lord’s imperishable Word, which cannot fail to bring the salvation begun in our conversion to its completion in its glorification (1 Peter 2:22–25). 



**CORAM DEO**

*Living before the face of God*

One of the reasons that we believe in the perseverance of the saints is that saying that a person of true faith can fall away from salvation ultimately casts doubt on the power of God and the permanence of His Word. All those who have truly been born again by the Word of God will certainly persevere therein to the end. They will continue to seek to grow in that Word and will not finally fall out of the gracious hand of God.

**FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Deut. 32:46–47  
John 6:63

**THE BIBLE IN A YEAR**

2 Chronicles 4–6  
John 12:20–50

**THE WEEKEND**

2 Chronicles 7–12  
John 13:1–14:14

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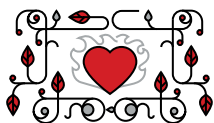
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# Joining Christ As He Prays for Us

DAVID ROMER PELOSI

**M**ANY CHRISTIANS WOULD SAY that some of their fondest experiences have been found in prayer. But why are we often uneasy about our prayer life?

The author of Hebrews seems to suggest that our reluctance to pray can emerge from its sacred nature (Heb. 4:14–16). Don't get me wrong; Bible reading is no less solemn, but prayer makes us more immediately aware of God's presence. As we close our eyes, the sublimity of God's holiness can be intimidating. But are we supposed to quickly suppress this feeling of inadequacy?

We should never make less of our unworthiness or God's majesty. The more we realize the gap covered by Christ, the more we feel the privilege of praying. And we need not make less of our sin, because of the greatness of our Mediator. Confidence in prayer grows proportionately to our understanding of Christ's priesthood.

Sometimes we fail to appreciate the marvelous phenomenon of prayer. "In Jesus' name" is more than a formula. It is about accessing God's throne through our Great High Priest while He is there pleading for us. Prayer engages us in an ongoing, perfectly mediated activity. We are joining Christ as He prays for us.

The God-man is now bridging the gap between our creatureliness and the Almighty's transcendence. He is there—the incarnated, all-tempted, law-keeping, sacrificed One—pleading beyond the heavenly veil in His resurrected and glorified body. He is there and "always lives to make intercession" (Heb. 7:25) for His own as supreme sacrifice and as Great High Priest, "the subject and the object of His priesthood," as Dr. R.C. Sproul said.

We pray as those seated with Christ in the heavenly places (Eph. 2:4–6). His prayers concern us individually, and from His mouth, our names are being made known in heaven. Because our lives are hidden in Him (Col. 3:3; see also Eph. 1:3), our imperfect prayers, services, and worship become acceptable to the Father. John Calvin wrote that from the majesty "which would otherwise be terrible to us, . . . nothing appears there but grace and paternal favor."

That Christ is seated is also, according to D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, an encouraging

*proof of the completion of His work of redemption, for the offering of "His own blood" to the Father was the last act, the last step, in our redemption. Then, and*

*not till then, did He sit down at the right hand of God in Glory.*

Invested with cosmic authority to plead for His people, Christ ensures that no condemnation can obstruct us from the access He has granted, which has been awarded to Him by the Father Himself (Rom. 8:33–34).

Christ's intercession is not granted by our worthiness. It is granted by merit, not supplication. Its infallibility is dependent not on influence but on Christ's satisfaction of God's justice. When sin was imputed to Jesus, God dealt with Him according to the law. Now, when Christ intercedes for us, it is a matter of justice for God to grant us access to Himself (1 John 1:9) and a question of timely request for the bestowal of every blessing.

Yet this must not reduce prayer to apathetic claims. The Father is all the more pleased in our redemption precisely because it was accomplished by His Beloved. Christ's dignity makes us supremely acceptable to God. His objective plea is intermingled with the subjective fragrance of "the full assemblage of all his spiritual excellencies and aspects of loveliness and love-worthiness," as Hugh Martin wrote.

The Son's intercession is never toward a reluctant Father. God joyfully elevates us alongside His Son and has seated us with Him in the heavenly places, and He delights to hear the prayers of His Son.


Similarly, the Son always acted out of purposeful love. According to Thomas Goodwin, nothing changed in "Christ's heart in heaven towards sinners on earth." Goodwin intended his book *The Heart of Christ* to reassure "poor souls... that [Christ] intercedes there with the same heart he

did here below; and that he is as meek, as gentle, as easy to be entreated, as tender in his affections."

Since we have such a High Priest, our weaknesses cannot disturb this heavenly prayer meeting. But we can still gain trust if, helped by His Spirit, we strive to join Christ by conforming our intercessions to His. Jesus is always heard because He asks perfectly.

With and like Christ, we should earnestly, continually, worshipfully, and assuredly pray for everything concerning the "uttermost" salvation of His people (Heb. 7:25): the "hold[ing] fast [to] our confession," "mercy,"

"grace," and "help in time of need" (4:14–16). Christ's active intercession is responsible for the sending of His Spirit; for every regeneration and justification that comes to pass; for preserving the saints through trials, temptations, and fresh forgiveness; for blessing, nourishment, purification, and embellishment of His bride; for revivals on earth and access to His glory in heaven.

Prayer is the stretching of empty hands to receive all the benefits that Christ's merit secured and that God in His grace is willing to dispense. As long as we "draw near to God through him" (7:25), we shouldn't refrain from the utmost enjoyment of our salvation. Robert Murray M'Cheyne's saying is almost insuperable: "If I could hear Christ praying for me in the next room, I would not fear a million of enemies. Yet the distance makes no difference; he is praying for me." A bolder step in grace is still possible, however: that we join Him even now. 

## JESUS IS ALWAYS HEARD BECAUSE HE ASKS PERFECTLY.

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**REV. DAVID ROMER PELOSI** is pastor-teacher of *Eglise Bonne Nouvelle* in Paris.



# No Flawless Church

JOHN CURRIE

**M**ANY YEARS AGO, a move for a new job meant that my young family needed to find a church in our new community. This provided an opportunity to train my children for the day that they would need to choose a church with their own families. We reviewed Acts 2:42–47, and after each visit to a congregation my boys provided their assessment of how, so far as one visit could show, the congregation evidenced the marks of church health found in the passage. How was the Word preached? Was a commitment to fellowship and prayer apparent? How were the sacraments observed? Did there appear to be a desire to add to the church through evangelism? The intent was to equip our family to choose a healthy church, using biblical categories. These are questions that should be asked again as we consider planting churches in a culture deeply shaped by consumerism and discontent.

These marks of church health form a pattern that is stitched through the narrative in Acts describing how Jesus built His church through His Apostles (e.g., 4:32–33; 6:4, 7; 12:5; 13:3; 19:10, 20). When the Apostle Paul sent Timothy to lead the church in Ephesus back to health, he focused his efforts on the means of prayer (1 Tim. 2:1,

8) and the Word (2 Tim. 3:16–4:4) while he also sought to restore discipline according to biblical orthodoxy and order (1 Tim. 1:3; 3:1–15; 5:19–20; 2 Tim. 1:13–14; 2:14). The Reformers recovered this scriptural pattern and summarized it as the means that God has ordained to administer His grace and therefore the marks of a true church. In other words, when we ask what Scripture tells us about how to identify a true church (its marks) and the methods that God uses (means) to work in and through it, the answer is found in the faithful administration of God's Word, prayer, the sacraments, and discipline. These are the instruments through which God, by His Spirit, powerfully does more than we could ask or imagine in the lives of church members (Eph. 3:20–21). Where these marks and means are present and faithfully administered, there a true church is, and Christians should feel not only free to join with it but immeasurably graced to be included.

In this age, however, no true church will be a perfect church. As Christians, we are already gloriously blessed to be included among Christ's people, but we await the better city (Heb. 11:10, 16, 40), the heavenly Zion without spot or wrinkle, in which the members of Christ's body will be freed from

all wickedness and weakness in glory (Eph. 5:26–27; Rev. 21:1–8). Until that glorious day, true churches will be a mix of good and bad (see Matt. 3:12; 13:24–30, 47–58). This is important to remember because we can be tempted to expect a perfection in our churches that the gospel has not promised until Jesus comes again. This form of perfectionism can lead Christians to grumbling and eventual disassociation with churches that, while not flawless, are faithful. When this overly realized ecclesiology meets Western consumerism, in which personal preference is king, faithful expressions of Christ’s bride are rejected as members move from church to church

in search of one that they feel satisfies their wants. By contrast, biblical expectations of the church’s progress defined by a biblical pattern of church health can help us not only to live with but to love the faithful yet imperfect churches that God has provided for us in this age.

This does not mean that the already–not yet of the church’s current state should be used as an excuse for an “already–not much” aspiration for a church’s health or as cover for failure to address sin in church members or leaders. Jesus rebuked churches with otherwise faithful marks because of their apathy, toleration of iniquity, and lifelessness (Rev. 2:2–5, 20; 3:2–3). Contentment with God’s means is not the same as complacency about Christ’s cause or His commands. It dishonors God to give lip service to the “ordinary means” when our hearts are apathetic to or rebellious toward the One who meets His people and ministers His grace through those means (Isa. 29:13; Mark 7:6–7). In such cases, we should not expect the blessing of His Spirit (Eph. 4:30; 1 Thess. 5:19). A faithful church is earnest

in its prayers, preaching, worship, and discipline, employing biblical means with sincere desire and effort toward God’s glory and the edification of those who receive them. But when commitment to the means that God has ordained to accomplish His purposes is married to holy aspiration for His glory in and through His church, we might expect to see the Spirit provide a foretaste of the glory that is to come, even in our yet-flawed churches (1 Cor. 14:25).

Augustine advised godly members who were experiencing difficulty with their church “mercifully to correct what they can; patiently to bear and lovingly to bewail and mourn what they cannot; until

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God either amends or corrects or in the harvest uproots the tares and winnows the chaff.” As Christians, we will, inevitably in this age, find ourselves in a flawed church. But where God has planted a faithful church within our community, we can thank God for His gracious provision, both for our nurture in Christ and for a witness to Christ in our world. And we can allow the disappointments and difficulties we experience to drive us, in faith and hope, to the means that He has appointed for our church’s transformation: prayer and the Word. Let us pray for the change that our churches need (Eph. 3:14–19), pray for the preaching of the Word (6:19), and speak the truth of the Word in love to the right people the right way (4:15; Matt. 7:3–5) as we eagerly wait for the day when we will enjoy communion with God in the perfect church planted in the new heavens and new earth. ■

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# The Church's Peace and Purity as a Witness

KEN MONTGOMERY

**A** STONE'S THROW AWAY from where our family lives, there is a scent-manufacturing facility that produces large quantities of fragrances and perfumes. On our way home, we often smell the potent and sweet scents wafting in our direction. In Psalm 133, David captures the aroma of God's dwelling place, of being in the congregation of the faithful. He likens the communion of saints to the fragrant oil that cascaded down on Aaron. Poured out on the high priest's head, the oil flowed down on the beard, and then down from his collar to the rest of his garments. This consecrated oil was a unique blend made by a chosen perfumer, and the Lord prohibited the concocting of this composition for any other purpose (Ex. 30:22–33). It was a one-of-a-kind recipe applied only to the furnishings of the tabernacle and the Levitical priests.

The “nowhere else to be found” oil, according to David, points to the exceptional peace that characterizes the gathered worshippers of the Lord. When we reflect on the relationship between the holy anointing oil of Exodus 30 and the unity of the people of God in Psalm 133, we are drawn to the conclusion that when it comes to the bonds between believers in Christ—brothers and

sisters in the Lord in the church—there is nowhere else in human society where such peace can be found.

The Lord Jesus defines His disciples not only as recipients of His peace (John 14:27) but also as His “peacemakers” (Matt. 5:9). In other words, much as a doctor “practices” medicine or an attorney “practices” law, the vocation of Christians is to be practitioners of peace. The working out of this calling demonstrates that we have been in the school of the Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6) and that the shalom of His kingdom permeates and seasons our life together (see Col. 3:15). The heavenly fountainhead of this peace is none other than the Holy Spirit (see Rom. 14:17), meaning that such harmony is attained not by a grassroots movement in pooling our resources but by partaking of the grace and wisdom from above (see James 3:17).

How do believers today exercise the peacemaking to which we are called? First, we must be those who readily forgive one another (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13). Our culture uses the nomenclature of *progress* and yet has produced experts in keeping records of misdeeds (digital and otherwise). How much advancement can genuinely be made

when the weight of wrongs is never off-loaded? But in the church, such a recipe for ongoing hostility should be foreign to us. Instead, we are in Christ to forgive, which involves burying the sins of others in the past and refusing to unearth them at any future point.

Corrie ten Boom paints a lovely picture of this when she writes: “When we confess our sins, God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever. . . . I believe God then places a sign out there that says ‘No Fishing Allowed!’” Likewise, when we forgive, we commit ourselves not to hold the sins of others to their account. In a world full of recriminations and threats of retaliation, the church has a potent testimony to offer in walking together in “the fragrance of forgiveness.”


Second, we must grow in the skill of preferring one another in love (see Rom. 13:10). That is, we are to adjust ourselves for the good of our fellow brothers and sisters, willing if necessary to forgo our own individual rights for the peace of the body of Christ. This is another strikingly countercultural posture in a society that leads with the foot of asserting personal styles and promoting one’s individual “brand.” Paul’s reminder is pertinent and also perennial: “Love . . . does not insist on its own way” (1 Cor. 13:4–5). The goal is not mere coexistence (sharing the same space) but to be co-laborers and co-operators in the work of the kingdom, “striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27).

Martin Luther summarizes this principle in proverbial form: “The Christian is most

free and servant of none. The Christian is most bound and servant of all.” Thus, when it comes to holding to the truth of the gospel, we are to be unyielding like a column of steel. But as it relates to serving our neighbor, we are to be flexible and accommodating, as Paul exemplifies in “becom[ing] all things to all people” (1 Cor. 9:22). Our liberty in Christ is not to be wielded as a club, that we might beat

up the weaker brother (see Rom. 14:15). Nor is it to be used to create a club where some believers are “in” and others are “out” (see Col. 2:18). The highest expression of Christian freedom is to serve others in love (Gal. 5:13). Part of Christian charity is taking into account all the factors that exist in each person and

personality (e.g., feelings, tastes, and temperaments) and acting accordingly.

Smell is one of the most difficult sensations to describe. Imagine that on a sunny spring day, you take a walk through a garden, smelling plumeria and wisteria, lily of the valley, gardenias, jasmine, and roses. You call your friend afterward and try to recount your experience. Though you do your best, it’s quite straining to convey the wealth of the surroundings. Finally you exclaim, “Come with me next week to experience this delight and joy for yourself!” In maintaining the “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3), members of Christ’s body call and invite many to the church where God commands His blessing, “life forevermore” (Ps. 133:3). 

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# The Unity and Continuity of the Covenants

STEPHEN G. MYERS

**I**F YOU SAT DOWN AND READ the entire Bible from cover to cover, you would notice that one theme surfaces repeatedly: covenant. A covenant is a binding relationship between parties that involves both blessings and obligations, and throughout Scripture, one finds God working to gather a people to Himself through these covenantal relationships. This understanding of Scripture is called *covenant theology*.

In Genesis 3:15, God first announces His intention to save His people through His covenant of grace. Working through this covenant, God would raise up a messianic Seed who would destroy the serpent and win God's people to Himself. In advancing this covenant of grace throughout history, God entered into a covenant with Noah (Gen. 6–9), with Abraham (Gen. 12; 15; 17), with Moses (Ex. 20–24), and with David (2 Sam. 7), all the while pointing forward to a new covenant inaugurated by Jesus Christ (Luke 22:20). In each of these covenantal administrations, God was incrementally accomplishing His purpose to gather a people to Himself. In fact, Revelation pictures all redemptive history in precisely this way, as the entire course of

redemption is symbolized by a dragon who is pursuing the child of a woman (Rev. 12). All redemptive history has been the fulfillment of God's promise of the covenant of grace in Genesis 3:15.

As God has brought this covenant of grace to progressive fulfillment, He has used what Hebrews 8:5 calls a "copy" and a "shadow" to teach His people and prepare them for Christ. A "copy" or a "shadow," in this sense, is an act, an institution, or even a person that, while it has its own meaning, has its ultimate significance in foreshadowing how God will save His people. For example, in the judgment and deliverance of the Noahic covenant, God was pointing to His ability, at the appointed time, to bring His covenantal purposes to their perfect completion (2 Peter 3:6–7). In His covenant with Abraham, God was showing His people that, by their faith in Him, He would gather them into an eternal city (Heb. 11:8–16). In the Mosaic covenant, God made clear the holiness that He desired in this redeemed people and showed what would be required to take away their guilt (Lev. 19:2; 17:11). In the Davidic covenant, God showed His people that His Messiah would be a righteous King who would reign over them (Ezek. 34:23–24). Finally, as the



prophets foretold the new covenant, they revealed that this Messiah would change, from the inside out (Ezek. 36:26), a people from every nation (Isa. 9:2).

All these copies and shadows inject tremendous continuity into Scripture. In Romans 4, Paul uses Abraham as an example of the faith that Christians are to have (vv. 1–5). In Galatians, Paul refers to Christians as “Abraham’s offspring” (3:29); he writes that God’s promises to Abraham

tament descriptions of Israel to describe the Christian church (1 Peter 2:9–10). In Hebrews, the faith of God’s people in every generation is surveyed so that “so great a cloud of witnesses” might encourage Christians to persevere in the faith (Heb. 12:1; see 11:1–12:2). God has one people, and He saves them through a shared faith; hence, the “cloud of witnesses” is relevant for Christians. Again, continuity within God’s covenant of grace is assumed.

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envisioned Christ (v. 16); and he refers to the Galatian Christians as “the Israel of God” (6:16). Repeatedly, Paul simply assumes that God is doing in the New Testament precisely what He was doing in the Old Testament.

Other New Testament authors make this same assumption. Peter suggests that God’s work in the Noahic covenant anticipated the coming fulfillment of the covenant of grace (2 Peter 3:5–7), and he uses Old Tes-

Strangely, this intentional continuity of God’s covenantal work creates a specific kind of discontinuity. For example, the sacrificial system instituted in the Mosaic covenant is dismissed in the new covenant (Heb. 10:1–10), even as the temple and its priests have passed away (7:11–28), dietary laws have been removed (Acts 10:9–16), and gentiles have been brought into the people of the Jewish Messiah (Rom. 11:11–24). These discontinuities are instructive. Why



is the sacrificial system gone? Because it has been fulfilled in Christ (1 Cor. 5:7). Why is the temple no more? Because through Jesus' accomplished work, God now dwells in His people by His Spirit (6:19–20). Jesus is the High Priest of His people (Heb. 4:14–16), He makes all things clean (Rom. 14:14–19), and He destroys all the barriers that separated Jews and gentiles (Eph. 2:11–22). The discontinuities in the covenant of grace are of a very specific sort. They all are discontinuities of progressive fulfillment. Something that God had been doing in the covenant of grace comes to its perfect fulfillment in Jesus Christ, and in light of that fulfillment, God sets aside older, more elementary ways of interacting with His people.

Paradoxically, Jesus is both the great continuity and the great discontinuity of the covenant of grace. He provides continuity, since all the trappings of God's covenant with His people are pointing to Christ. And He also provides discontinuity, for the fulfillment of covenantal purposes in Him means that older ways of preparing for Him are set aside. The discontinuity of the covenant of grace is specifically a discontinuity of progressive fulfillment; fulfilled in Christ, older "copies" and "shadows" are no longer needed.

In dealing with the seeming discontinuity of the covenant of grace, we must address two specific passages. The first is Jeremiah 31:31–34. There, God declares that He will make a "new covenant" with Israel that is "not like the covenant that I made with their fathers." In this new covenant, God's law will be written on the hearts of His people, they all will know Him, and all their sin will be forgiven. Certainly, there is discontinuity here, but it is a discontinuity of progressive fulfillment. God had long called for His people to be

changed internally by His covenant dealings with them (Deut. 10:12–17), and they had known that change (Ps. 51:10–12). Jesus, who inaugurates the new covenant, both secures and guarantees that heart renovation (2 Cor. 5:17). God had always made Himself known to Israel (Ps. 103:7), but in Jesus, God would be known with such clarity that old shadows would depart (2 Cor. 4:6). God had instituted the sacrificial system to show His people that they needed blood to cleanse their sin (Heb. 10:3), and in Jesus, that blood is provided (v. 10). Much would change under the new covenant. But that discontinuity was a discontinuity of progressive fulfillment, wherein God, by bringing His unfolding covenant of grace to greater fulfillment in Christ, set aside the former ways of pointing forward to what He, in the new covenant, had accomplished.

The second passage that seems to speak strongly of discontinuity is Hebrews 8:1–13. There, Scripture declares that the old covenant was not "faultless" (v. 7) and that the new covenant of Jeremiah 31:31–34 makes the old covenant "obsolete" (Heb. 8:13). The discontinuity within the covenant of grace could not be more strongly stated. Yet again, it is a discontinuity of progressive fulfillment. Until Jesus returns in judgment, God's unfolding covenant of grace remains in a state of imperfect completion. We anticipate much even today. So certainly, the old covenant was not "faultless"; at that stage of redemptive history, the covenant of grace only pointed to certain things that, in Christ, were accomplished. And when these promised things were accomplished, the former "copies" and "shadows" that only anticipated them instantly became "obsolete." Having been fulfilled in Christ, certain paraphernalia of God's covenant dealings with His peo-

ple were set aside, but they were set aside because God's redemptive work had been progressively accomplished, not because it had changed.

While certain types and shadows have been set aside, that does not mean that they were unimportant in their time. At every point in redemptive history, being part of God's "covenant of grace people" has required that an individual participate in the specific covenantal administration


Testament as it instructs Christians how to live as God's people. We are to have faith like Abraham (Rom. 4:16), live like a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9), and walk in faithful witness as older saints have done (Heb. 11). All of God's covenantal work has unfolded and has been written down to reveal Jesus (Luke 24:27–32) and to instruct us how we are to live as we await His return (1 Cor. 10:11). The God with whom a thousand years are as a day

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of that day. For example, for one living under the Mosaic covenant, his hope always was in the blood of Christ toward which the sacrificial system pointed (Heb. 9:11–28), but it was also necessary to participate in that sacrificial system (Lev. 17:11). At each stage of increasing clarity, God's covenantal administration has been His covenant of grace.

Why has God's covenantal work been marked by this dynamic of progressing clarity? As God tells Israel, it is through covenant that He has been shaping them—and us—into His people (Deut. 29:12–13). Notice how often the New Testament assumes categories or ideas from the Old

has worked, throughout the generations of His people, to shape that people into His own, His beloved Israel (Gal. 6:16), the bride of the glorious Bridegroom (Eph. 5:23–32).

Covenant is woven throughout Scripture. Why? Because in God's covenantal work, He has been working to bring His people to Himself and He has made them His own. 

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