

GOD'S TIMELESS WORD FOR TODAY'S MINISTRY

Presented at:

South Atlantic District - WELS
St. Petersburg, Florida
June 13-15, 1994

Presented by:

Richard D. Balge
Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary
Mequon, Wisconsin

God's Timeless Word for Today's Ministry

The topic, though not the wording, was suggested by your president. The *mandate*, the *motivation*, and the *message* for today's ministry are there in God's Word; they are not dated or alterable. There is also much information in the New Testament regarding the *manpower* through which various ministries were carried out. We learn a great deal about the *mindset* and a little bit about the *methods* of those who undertook the work.

Jesus and his apostles were Jews, living in the Roman Empire, which was heir to the Hellenistic (Greek) culture. Hellenists loved wisdom, rational inquiry, and historical investigation. They asked the Greek questions, "Why?" and "How?" Many had departed from their ancestors' worship of many gods, but even the most enlightened practiced various forms of superstition. The best and brightest are included in Paul's description of spiritual and moral bankruptcy at Romans 1:18-32.

When Jesus was born the Hellenistic Empire of Alexander and his successors had long since been fragmented and given way to the might of the Roman Empire, but the Greek culture survived. In 30 B.C. the Senate of Rome elected Octavian as *princeps Senatus*, "first head" of the Senate, and thus ruler of Rome. They renewed the mandate in 29 B.C. and made it permanent in 28. Octavian reigned as Caesar Augustus until 14 A.D., ushering in an era of internal stability and secure borders which endured for about 200 years, the age known as the *Pax Romana* (Roman Peace).

Five main highways with their branches went out from Rome to the ends of the Empire, used by the legions, by commercial travelers, and by an excellent postal service. During and after the age of Augustus there was also continued extension of the borders. At its largest the Empire extended from the Atlantic Ocean to the Euphrates River, from the Sahara Desert to Scotland. It included sizable parts of three continents: Europe, Asia, and Africa. Its land area was about equal to the 48 contiguous United States.

A common language and culture, law and order, relative ease of travel and communications -- all were factors favorable to the gospel's spread in the first generation and first centuries of the church's existence.

In the pages of the New Testament we meet or hear of Samaritans, pagans with many gods, philosophers of various schools, barbarians, Scythians, and an Ethiopian eunuch. There were citizens, free men, and slaves; officials, governors, and soldiers. There were also "God-fearing Gentiles," people of non-Jewish ancestry who in some degree had converted to Judaism.

Among the Jews there were those who feared God and those who were Jews in name only. There were Pharisees, Saducees, Zealots, and Essenes. The last are never mentioned in the New Testament, perhaps because in their self-chosen isolation they never came into contact with Jesus and his disciples. There were Palestinian Jews living in Judea and Galilee, and Jews of the Dispersion who had been scattered all over the Roman Empire and beyond.

After Pentecost, there were Christians from all of the above-mentioned Jewish and Gentile groups. This was in keeping with the command and the promise of Jesus' "Great Commission."

The Mandate

We call it the Great Commission: *"All authority in heaven, and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age"* (Matthew 28:18-20). Because he is God, the Son of God has had all authority from eternity. That authority was not diminished when he became man, but he did not for the most part use it. Now, after his perfect life as the second Adam, after his death as the perfect sacrifice for all, after his vindication on Easter morning, the victorious God-Man Jesus uses his authority to the fullest extent. The Victor over sin, death, and the devil promises to be with his disciples *"to the very end of the age."*

"Make disciples of all nations." Gather people who will trust me for their salvation, learn from me, follow me. A tiny group from a tiny land was to take on the responsibility of proclaiming Jesus and his work throughout the Mediterranean world and beyond. What the Old Testament had foretold God had brought to pass: *"He told them, 'This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day.'" What the Old Testament had foretold God would bring about: "Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations"* (Luke 24:46,47).

That which is to continue *"to the very end of the age"* must involve disciples who were not with Jesus during those forty days between his resurrection and his ascension, who are not contemporary with the apostles. The mandate is still in effect, directed to all disciples of Jesus in every generation. It is not debatable. It is our assignment as Christians. By his authority and with the promise of his presence, we citizens of heaven are on this earth to reach across cultural barriers and boundaries with the good news of God's forgiveness in Christ Jesus.

The Motivation

In time and according to circumstances the disciples organized for the work of preaching the gospel to *"every tribe and language and people and nation."* Whatever committees there were and whatever programs they devised and administered would have been much ado about nothing if the Spirit of Christ had not motivated and empowered them. At the time of Jesus' arrest the Twelve had forsaken him, fleeing. During his trial they were scattered, except for one who denied him. After his death they were crushed and they hid in locked rooms. They doubted and despaired. Even after the risen Savior appeared to them they went back to fishing. They were not yet ready to act.

"He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God... When they met together, they asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to

Israel?' He said to them: *'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth'*" (Acts 1:3,6-8). They still held some of the popular but mistaken notions about why the Messiah came and what his kingdom was about. Throwing off the Roman yoke, restoring Israel to the glory days of David and Solomon, establishing a world power to whom all nations would look for moral direction -- these were dreams that ordinary Jews cherished. Jesus is not that kind of king and that is not the nature of his kingdom.

"You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8b). This is the kingdom of God. It is not a place but an activity. It is God's rule of Grace in human hearts. It is established by testimony about Christ, his saving work, his accomplished salvation. Those who witnessed his gracious power in action would bear witness to what they had seen, heard and learned. In ever-widening circles this kingdom of grace would extend *"to the ends of the earth."* Not with an imperative but with a promise Jesus motivated them: *"You will [future of certainty] be my witnesses."* Ten days after his ascension, on Pentecost, the promised Spirit was poured out on them in spectacular manner. Motivated and empowered, they began the work of making disciples.

The man who would be the Savior's most "productive" missionary/minister was not present to hear Jesus' mission mandate and promises. He was a fanatical enemy of Christ and his church. He was there when the first Christian martyr, Stephen, was put to death. He approved the action and held the coats of those who threw the stones. He conducted raids from house to house, arresting and imprisoning men and women who followed the way of Jesus of Nazareth. Furious misguided religious zeal personified, that was Saul of Tarsus.

On his way to Damascus to arrest Christians Saul himself was "arrested." The One who had been executed as a criminal in the manner reserved for the lowest criminals had triumphed over death. God had exalted Jesus of Nazareth and Saul could no longer deny it. To fearful and reluctant Ananias the Lord said, *"Saul is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel"* (Acts 9:15). The Friend of tax collectors and sinners had chosen a Pharisee to do his work.

That was grace, the unmerited and unconditional favor of God. Grace is what Saul of Tarsus -- the Apostle Paul -- called it all his days, never forgetting what God called him to be. The word appears about 125 times in the New Testament and more than 100 times it is Paul who uses it.

From Paul especially we learn that we came into this world as born enemies of God, that there was nothing we could do to satisfy God's just demands or remove the guilt of our sin or escape the punishment we deserve.

From him we also learn: We *"are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus"* (Romans 3:24). Also: *"...It is by grace you have been saved, through faith --*

and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God -- not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8,9). Also: God "has saved us and called us to a holy life -- not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace..." (2 Timothy 1:9).

Grace is not our decision for Christ but his decision to rescue us by living a perfect life in our place and dying for our sins. Grace is not our commitment to him but his commitment to the way of the cross. Not, "I found it," but he found us when we were not looking for him, when we didn't want to be found, when we didn't even realize we were lost.

Not only collectively as a synod or in congregations, but as individual Christians, we have unfinished business. We do not have an eternity in which to finish it. Jesus speaks of an end to this age. We do not know the day and the hour of his coming again, but we know that we are on earth to use our days and hours to bring the gospel to *"every tribe and language and people and nation."* The Lord has included every baptized Christian in his work force.

The Manpower

The Savior committed the apostleship to men of varying backgrounds and abilities. Peter and John were leaders, part of the inner circle of the twelve. Yet, they were regarded as "unschooled, ordinary men" (Acts 4:13). They had the best of teachers, of course; for three years they learned practical theology from Jesus. They saw all that Jesus did and heard all that he taught. They had experienced the terrible events of Good Friday. They had seen Jesus, touched him, eaten breakfast with him after his resurrection. They received further instruction during the forty days after he arose and before he ascended. At last, according to Jesus' promise, they received power from the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. We speak of manpower, but in these men there was a special "God-power" which equipped them for their great assignment.

The "one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe" (Ephesians 4:10) did not limit the gospel ministry to the apostles. He also gave "some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers" (Ephesians 4:11). These familiar words are not about position and title but about function and service, under whatever title. Prophets tell forth God's message, evangelists share the gospel, pastors shepherd the flock, teachers teach. Today we expect our called workers to do all of these, and more, working alone or in team ministries.

The gospel ministry, however, is not limited to the public ministry, to those who are called to speak in the name and by the authority of the church. Those who are in the public ministry are there "to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the full measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12,13). The primary question is not, "What is the synod or the mission board or our congregation doing?" The primary question is, "What does the Lord want me to do or get ready to do?"

There was a "thirteenth apostle," the Apostle to the Gentiles. He preached to Jews as well, just as the others also preached to Gentiles. Paul, however, was the specially chosen and specially equipped ambassador to the nations. He was the missionary and pastor without equal.

What a remarkably equipped man Saul/Paul was! As a biblical scholar he had been the pupil of the great Rabbi Gamaliel. He was, his own description, a sort of "super-Jew" (Philippians 3:4-6). He was also a master of the Greek language and of Greek rhetoric, well acquainted with Greek literature and philosophy. He was a Roman citizen who knew what his rights were and how to take advantage of them for the gospel's sake. His hometown, Tarsus, was "no mean city," the site of a renowned university.

With a broad-based education, at home in two cultures, but first of all a citizen of heaven, this world-citizen knew God's word and he knew the people to whom he was to bring God's Word. He understood and grieved over his own people's apostasy. He understood and deplored the godlessness and immorality to the Gentile world. Combining what he had observed with scriptural insight, he described the people of every culture -- and much of his description sounds very modern. Paul's understanding of human nature and human conduct was an important part of his equipment for ministry. Romans 1:18-32 is a profound scripture-based interpretation of what he observed and read about. It answers the old clinker, "What about those who never heard about God, his law, the gospel?" His answer: "They are without excuse." How is God's wrath revealed? It is revealed in this, that God punishes those who suppress their natural knowledge of him by giving them over to "sinful desires," "shameful lusts," "a depraved mind." Their very sins are punishment for their sin of unbelief! Every ordinary human relationship is spoiled, not only those in the sexual realm. And, these unbelieving sinners want company: "They not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them." This is the human race to which Paul preached the gospel. These are the people to whom we owe the gospel.

The education and training for the public ministry which we strive to provide in our synod's preparatory schools, colleges, and seminary is not essentially different from the preparation which God in his wisdom provided for Paul. The study of Scripture, of ancient and modern cultures, of human nature at its best and at its worst, equips men and women for a lifetime of learning. It equips them with the ability to understand what is familiar and makes them willing to learn, to understand what is alien. All of this, of course, would be useless without faith in Christ and love for all whom he has redeemed. And that brings us to a consideration of what we can learn from the New Testament about the mindset of those who first carried on the gospel work.

The Mindset

The Bible knows nothing of "happy heathen" who live a carefree life and should be left alone. It does not know of religious people who please God by "following the light that is in them." It knows only of human beings who are in darkness until the gospel light shines on them, who are Satan's slaves until the good news about Jesus sets them free to serve God. These are "decent" people

who seem to live upright and useful lives without Christ, but they still need him and he still says, "*Make disciples of them.*" They may be content as they are, but they will be miserable for eternity without Christ. He says, "*Make disciples of them.*"

Although Jesus' ministry was limited to Palestine and his first mission was to his own people, the Gospels provide many examples of his loving attitude and actions toward non-Jews -- often while he was traveling or "on vacation." There was the Samaritan woman at the well of Sychar: from a despised race, belonging to a sect which had corrupted God's Old Testament message, an outcast because of her adulterous life. Jesus offered her the water of life. "Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony" (John 4:5-42).

Jesus healed a demon-possessed man in the region of the Gerasenes, pagan people who raised pigs (Luke 8:26-39) At Capernaum he commended the faith of the Gentile centurion whose servant he had healed (Luke 7:1-9; Matthew 8:5-13). Near Tyre (in modern Lebanon), he was approached by a Greek woman who was born in Syrian Phoenicia. She pleaded with him to heal her daughter, would not be put off by what seemed an unanswerable and insulting rebuff, gained her desire, and was commended for her great faith (Mark 7:24-30; Matthew 15:21-28). East of the Jordan River, in the region of the Decapolis, the people begged Jesus to place his hand on a man who was deaf and could hardly talk. The region was a center of Hellenistic culture, not of Jewish faith and piety. Jesus healed the man, making clear that his grace is for people of all nations (Mark 7:31-36). Ten men from the unclean and outcast sub-culture of lepers approached him and were healed. One of them was also from the hated Samaritan race and sect. Jesus healed him and, when only he of the ten returned, the Savior said: "*Rise and go, your faith has made you well*" (Luke 17:19).

Tax collectors were a despised sub-culture within the nation of Israel. The one in Jesus' parable, with his confession of sin and his plea for God's mercy, was not typical of those men. There was nothing inherently good or lovable about them. As agents of the Roman government they were despised as traitors who worked for the hated foreign oppressor. Jesus invited one of those men, Levi Matthew to be one of the Twelve (Luke 5:27-32; Matthew 9:9-13). When the Pharisees and the teachers of the law objected to his eating with them, Jesus answered them, "*It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance*" (Luke 5:32).

Jesus' words imply that he is a physician. That meant that the tax collectors with whom he was eating were diseased, eternally and fatally diseased with sin. There was no nonsense about finding the good in them or bringing out their real potential. No, they were sick to death and he had come to heal them and others like them. If ever a person lived who knew sin when he saw it and looked it in the face and saw it for what it is and knew what kind of evil human nature is capable of and knew what grief and just anger it causes in God, it was Jesus.

He saw self-righteousness in the Pharisees and teachers of the law. He said that any righteousness that could possibly admit a person to God's favor would have to be better than their righteousness. But people who are full of and satisfied with their own righteousness can never

appreciate that better righteousness which belongs to Jesus, ^{and} is ours through faith. Only the law of God can crush them and empty them of their own righteousness. Only the Gospel can create them new by declaring them righteous (forgiven) on the basis of Christ's finished work.

It is possible to have the doctrine of justification straight and yet harbor snobbish attitudes. First-generation Christians needed to be warned: "My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, 'Here's a good seat for you,' but say to the poor man, 'You stand here' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,' have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?" (James 2:1-5). If he had been writing to certain WELS congregations in certain parts of the United States, James might have added: "Do not look through or past newcomers, well-dressed and impressive or otherwise. Do not keep your distance from new members until you are sure they'll behave like "our kind of people" and fit in. Don't confuse your culture with the Lord's teaching. Rather, welcome them warmly and help them to become at home in their new fellowship."

Believers in the first generation of the church needed to be treated with evangelical tact and Paul demonstrated it on many an occasion. Let a single example of his approach to a rambunctious congregation suffice: "By the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you...." (2 Corinthians 10:1). He wanted to be a Christ toward those immature, arrogant, rebellious Christians who had not completely recovered from their Gentile upbringing. Appealing, not demanding; meek, not assertive; gentle, not overbearing.

The attempt to be tactful must never degenerate into an insincerity which fails to speak clearly and frankly when that is called for. There is nothing patronizing in Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, no catering to the weakness of a lost sinner: "Jesus said to her, 'You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, that you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true...!' You Samaritans worship what you do not know, for salvation is from the Jews" (John 3:18,22). Plain talk to slay a sinner so that the gospel could raise her to life!

For the gospel's sake, for the ministry's sake, for the sake of souls Paul did not hesitate to name the special vice, the particular sin of a given ethnic group. He quoted one of their own (false) prophets to make the point: "For there are many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision group. They must be silenced, because they are ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach -- and that for the sake of dishonest gain. Even one of their own prophets has said, 'Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.' This testimony is true. Therefore, rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith..." (Titus 1:10-13).

Stereotyping? Perhaps. Would Paul have acknowledged any exceptions to the stereotype? Of course. He applied the stereotype, nevertheless, to the false teachers who were troubling the churches on Crete. There is no condescending, "Make allowances; we must put up with some of this; they can't do any better and we shouldn't expect them to." Rather, when the worst characteristics of their culture manifested themselves he said, "Rebuke them sharply."

Paul would put himself at anyone's service, adjust to anyone's culture, accommodate himself to anyone's lifestyle (excluding, of course, what was sinful), if it might help to win that person to eternal life. Though his stomach may not have rejoiced at Gentile cuisine he was willing to become like the Gentiles in diet, never forgetting that he was under the law of Christ (the law of love). He would do that "so as to win those not having the law." Strong in his understanding of Christian liberty, he put himself in the sandals of those who were still weak in understanding, "to win the weak." Giving up his exercise of freedom in certain matters, he adapted his conduct to the sensitive consciences of those who had not yet learned perfectly what it means to be free in Christ. Paul embodies a perspective to be coveted in any gospel ministry: "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22).

The attitudes and actions of the first-century believers made them attractive to some, at least, of the unbelievers. The manner and conduct of the Christians could serve for what we today call "pre-evangelism." In Jerusalem the first congregation is described as "praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). Even those who were not in the fellowship of believers had to like and respect those Jerusalem Christians.

In our day, too, it ought to be possible for unbelievers to say of us: "Christians are helpful neighbors and good citizens." Our lives cannot make believers out of them, but the way we live might at least remove some obstacles to their hearing the gospel.

"Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life" (Philippians 2:14-16). We have a responsibility to the family of God -- and to those whom God will call -- to let the family resemblance show. Children of God take after their Father and imitate their Brother. Shine in the darkness of a crooked and depraved generation. Better to light a candle than to curse the darkness. Better to live in the larger, often hostile, culture than to close ourselves off and hide in a closet and wait for a better day. A better eternity is coming, but while there is time let us be all that God has called us to be.

The Message

What was the message which the apostles addressed to the people of Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth? "*Preach the good news,*" said Jesus. "*Repentance and forgiveness of sins,*" he said. Every human being needs to hear it because every human being has

sinned. It is good news for every human being because in Christ God has justified (acquitted, declared righteous) every human being -- gratis: "There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Romans 34:22-24).

This justification, or declaration of righteousness, is received by faith, not by works: "In [the gospel] a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written, 'The righteous will live by faith'" (Romans 1:17). Jesus Christ wants nothing more or less from people than their trust and faith. He will not accept them on the basis of their best works, words, or intentions.

The jailer at Philippi asked Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved -- you and your household" (Acts 16:30). There was nothing cool or theoretical about the jailer's question. It was not asked by a man who wanted to calmly discuss the problem of existence, to "talk about religion." It was a desperate question and it needed a valid answer. The answer is not "Do this," or "Do that." It is, "rely on him who has done it all, who has done it for you." The Lord Jesus Christ has experienced God's wrath in our place, suffering at Golgotha the God-forsakenness which we deserved. He has suffered the wages of sin to win the gift of God for us, eternal life. The God who is just and the God who is love reconciled his love and his justice at the cross in the Lord Jesus Christ. Trust him, and you will be saved.

The book of Acts provides many samples of what the apostles' message was. At its heart was the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. It was a message of repentance and forgiveness of sins -- law and gospel. It frequently included a summary of salvation history. When appropriate it was based on Old Testament history and prophecy. On Pentecost Peter, preaching to Jews from three continents and many cultures, included all of these elements in his message.

With the proselyte Cornelius and his household he recounted Jesus' ministry, made reference to "the prophets" (for Cornelius as a proselyte of the gate was familiar with the Jewish Scriptures), and struck the central theme which recurs in so many of the Acts accounts: "They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day" (Acts 2:32). Without the fact of Jesus' resurrection there is no point in talking about him.

Paul did not hesitate to preach repentance to the intellectuals of the Areopagus in Athens. He never got to name the name of Jesus because they stopped listening when he got to the resurrection, but he was certainly intending to preach the whole counsel of God. Immortality of the soul many or most of them could stomach, but resurrection? They held with the words of Aeschylus, one of their great writers of tragedy:

"When the dust has soaked up a man's blood,
Once he is dead, there is no resurrection."

Paul adapted his approach to his hearers, but his message of repentance was what it had been to everyone, everywhere: "Now [God] commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:31). Varying ministries might call for varied approaches but never for a different message. Preachers and teachers strive for freshness and variety in their presentation of law and gospel. They must, however, preach and teach law and gospel even when they cannot come up with something varied and fresh.

After his arrest in Jerusalem and during his imprisonment in Caesarea, before Felix and Festus and Agrippa (Acts 24 and 25), Paul tried at each appearance to get to the message that God raised Jesus from the dead. Before Felix, "Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come" (Acts 24:25).

Always, in every place, often in the face of opposition and skepticism, the message let people know that they were damned sinners whom Christ has saved. Wherever that message was proclaimed the Spirit was present and active. He gave the message its authority, its authenticity, and its power. He gave Christ's servants the power to speak the message.

Dramatic signs, like those of Pentecost, sometimes accompanied the proclamation, sometimes not. When they were present they served the cause of the gospel by getting people's attention, by attesting the apostles' authority, by signaling that the word had had its effect.

On Cyprus the proconsul Sergius Paulus believed when he saw a sign, but he believed because of the gospel: "When the proconsul saw what happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord" (Acts 13:12). At Lystra the healing of a man crippled from birth served to attract a crowd and provide an opportunity to preach to a great number of pagans (Acts 14:8-18). Paul cited the "miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles" (Acts 15:12) to demonstrate that his gospel was authentic. He reminded those in Corinth who challenged his apostolic authority: "The things that mark an apostle -- signs, wonders and miracles -- were done among you with great perseverance" (2 Corinthians 12:12).

Nevertheless, the power that created faith and converted hearts and broke down barriers was the gospel. "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). At Antioch Jewish Christian refugees from Saul's persecution began a ministry to Greeks, "telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed, and turned to the Lord" (Acts 11:21).

After years of ministry Paul was making plans to visit the capital of the Roman Empire and preach there. What could he hope to say in that city of great men, empire builders, and important intellectuals? Should he keep a low profile, soften his message, perhaps just stay away? No! "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" (Romans 1:16).

The gospel is God's power to save. Even the cultured, the proud, the powerful people of Rome must be confronted by the dynamic message that a provincial Jew rose again to rescue the human race from eternal death to eternal life. Paul does not expect to be disappointed in the effect of that proclamation. Its power is not limited to any one group of people. It is for Jews and Gentiles, wise and unlearned. It is powerful in its sweetness to comfort little children and old people. It is powerful to make strong men and moralists and philosophers acknowledge their Savior.

It is powerful, "for in [it] a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last.." (Romans 1:17). This righteousness is not that which God demands in his unchanging law, but that which God provides in his Son. It does not say, "Obey." It says, "Christ obeyed in your place and gave his life to pay the penalty of your disobedience." It is God's power to impart salvation. It works the faith which accepts the righteousness. It convinces us that this righteousness is ours "by faith, from first to last."

Does that make for a ministry that marches from mass conversion to spectacular growth to splendid success? Paul had experienced opposition from the outside, had dealt with internal problems of the church, had seen meager results often enough to know that the ministry is not one grand and glorious triumph after the other. But he kept on working, with joy, confident in the Lord's resurrection, sure of the gospel's power (Cp 1 Corinthians 1:21-31).

Jesus said, *"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn 'a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law-- a man's enemies will be those of his own household'"*
(Matthew 10:34-36).

The same gospel which brings life to us has the smell of death in it for those who say "no" to the peace of God in Jesus Christ. The message of peace then becomes a sundering, separating weapon of strife, a sword. Even in families the Christ of peace can become the Christ of conflict. He tells us this so that we will remember that we are in the Church Militant. Better the negative reaction of some who hear than that all should go to hell because we have not disturbed their false peace, upset their corrupt world-view, robbed them of their illusions. Better opposition and failure in our attempts than never to try. And so the symbol of our faith and our preaching is not a couch but a cross.

Is there a sign that can attest the power of the gospel message in our lives so that others can be attracted to the good news for their lives? Yes, says Jesus: *"By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another"* (John 13:35).

The Methods

In this section there will not be much "this is how to do it." There are things to be learned, however, from the methods of Christ's first ministers.

When Jesus said, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8), he spoke in the future tense, predicting and not commanding. On the one hand, he did not hand them a "how to" book." On the other hand, this ministry was not going to be disorganized, random, or helter-skelter. He described an ever-widening circle: the urban culture of Jerusalem, the villages of Judea, a mission to their "cousins" in Samaria, and then a far-flung mission to the ends of the earth. The overall impression in Acts is of planned, organized activity. There were also surprise opportunities which the apostles took advantage of. There were times when the Holy Spirit had a better idea and let them know it.

Mission and ministry in the New Testament were carried on with groups and with individuals. A few examples among many will suffice to illustrate the point.

Jesus at the Well of Sychar began by evangelizing a woman and spent the next two days winning a large number of Samaritans to whom the woman told the story of her encounter with Jesus. She, incidentally, was not a leader in the community but quite the opposite.

Acts 8 tells us of Philip's successful work in an urban center of Samaria. In the midst of his busy and fruitful ministry with that despised ethnic group, an angel of the Lord told Philip to go to the desert area of the Gaza road. "So he started out, and on this way he met an Ethiopian eunuch.... This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, 'Go to that chariot and stay near it'" (Acts 8:26-29). You know the rest of the story. Philip, at God's bidding, left^a "where the people are" ministry in order to conduct a ministry to one.

Another characteristic of the mission activity described in Acts is that the first stop for Paul and his co-workers, whenever possible, was the synagogue of whatever city they entered. There was a theological reason for doing so, the special place of the Jews in God's salvation economy. There was also an important practical reason: That was where Gentile proselytes gathered and they could provide an entrance into the Gentile community.

While it was natural and practical to use the Scriptures when addressing people who knew the Scriptures, Paul and Barnabas had to exploit something else that was available at Lystra. There, after God through Paul granted healing to a man who had been lame from birth, the crowd of pagans shouted, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" (Acts 14:11). They prepared to offer sacrifice to Barnabas as the supreme god Zeus and to Paul as the messenger god Hermes. Paul and Barnabas did not, could not, appeal to the Old Testament Scriptures as they protested this action and shouted to the crowd. Instead, they appealed to the people's natural knowledge of the Supreme

Being who is the God of nature: "The living God...made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy" (Acts 14:15-17).

It is a good example of taking what is there and building on it, meeting people where they are and beginning with what they do know. It is also an example of an unfinished and unsuccessful sermon: "Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them. Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead" (Acts 14:18, 19).

In his address to the Areopagus at Athens Paul also used what was there (Acts 17:16-34). In that city of intellectuals, site of the World's oldest university, he found many gods and an altar inscribed TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. High philosophy had not put a stop to the service of idols. It had been said that there were more gods than men in Athens. Paul's distress over the number of idols in the city moved him to begin conversations in the marketplace, where he could make contact with the Gentiles who served those idols. The marketplace was not only a place of business. It was also the place where philosophers and gentlemen of leisure met to exchange ideas and to ask, "What's new?"

"A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, 'What is this babbler trying to say?' Others remarked, 'He seems to be advocating foreign gods.' They said this because Paul was preaching about Jesus and the resurrection" (Acts 17:17, 18). The Epicureans said that God, or the gods, are not interested in men's doings. The Stoics affirmed the existence of a god, but some at least confused the Creator with his creation: pantheism -- everything is God.

Now, at was the official function of the Areopagus (so named for Mars Hill, where they once had met) to examine new religious and philosophical ideas, to see whether they should be tolerated in Athens. As he set out to present his teaching and if possible preach the gospel, Paul used the altar TO AN UNKNOWN GOD as his point of departure: "Now what you worship as unknown I am going to proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands" (Acts 17:23,24). How foolish to build an image or a house for the One who created everything!

Obviously none of the gods represented at the shrines and altars of Athens are in charge. He has not lost interest or gone into retirement: "Now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:30f).

As had occurred in Lystra, the sermon was interrupted. The results of Paul's work in Athens were meager by human standards. God, however, did have his precious few in that city and one of them was a member of the Areopagus, Dionysius.

Another important feature of mission and ministry in the New Testament was followup. Coupled with a zeal to reach out to the nations with the gospel was a pastoral concern for nurturing those who had heard and believed.

"When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them" (Acts 8:14). We assume that their purpose was to offer suggestions and help to Philip, who was working there as an evangelist. Philip was one of those who had been chosen to oversee the distribution of relief in the Jerusalem church. God had given him the necessary gifts to do the work of an evangelist. How was he faring? What was his teaching? Two apostles followed up on the work in that field.

Paul and his co-workers regularly revisited the churches which had been founded during their mission tours (Acts 14:21; 15:36,41). The entire third mission tour was intended more to revisit and nourish existing churches than to open new fields (Acts 18:23; 19:1ff; 2 Corinthians 2:1; 12:14; 13:1; Acts 20:1-5). The visits were more than social visits, more than rallies for mutual encouragement. They were used for imparting further instruction, especially in places where the apostles had not been able to spend much time on their initial visit. An essential aspect of making and keeping and strengthening disciples is teaching them to obey everything that Jesus has commanded. The apostles did that.

Earlier, Barnabas had recognized that if the Greeks in Antioch were going to be steadfast they would need continuing instruction and that he would need help in providing it. "Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people (Acts 11:25,26). That was one New Testament example among many of team ministry.

One activity of the apostles which still affects us in a direct way is their writing. They set forth the foundation of the Christian faith, justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. They entered in on the general principles of sanctification and often dealt with specific issues of Christian living. The apostles are still teaching all that Jesus commanded. Their words in the New Testament are God's Word and they are the one essential tool for a faithful ministry in our time.

In their ministry the apostles faced special problems which required patient, firm, and tactful instruction in how faith works through love. For example, Christian men in Thessalonica had to be instructed in two separate letters that God wants his people to work. The Greek male, to the extent he could afford to do so, tended to leave work to women and slaves. That left him free to spend his days in the marketplace, discussing world and local affairs, and gossiping. Paul, appealing to the principle of brotherly love, instructed them: "Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody" (1 Thessalonians 4:11,12). The instruction to work had to be reinforced with instruction for church discipline in his second letter (2 Thessalonians 3:6,7, 11-13).

New Christians need to be taught that certain kinds of conduct and attitudes are sin. They need to be reinforced in this knowledge, especially since some cultures do not regard certain attitudes and actions to be sinful. "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You need to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of the Creator" (Colossians 3:5-10).

The methods of Jesus' apostles provide patterns for us to adopt or adapt, when that seems practical. We are not bound to make their methods our own, but we would be foolish to ignore or reject the model of successful ministers who were trained by Jesus himself. We are not limited, either, to the methods they used, as long as the methods we devise or borrow are in keeping with the gospel and not unworthy of it. We want to be able to say, as Paul did: "...We have renounced secret and shameful ways, we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Corinthians 4:2).

The MANDATE for mission and ministry is timeless. The MOTIVATION is there everytime we "read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest" the Word of God, the Spirit-power is available to enlist, enable, and empower each of us as MANPOWER to carry out some part of the mandate. Lord, cultivate in each of us the MINDSET to do it, making faithful use of your timeless MESSAGE, adopting and adapting the METHODS of your servants the apostles, who began this work more than 1900 years ago.