

Lessons on the Life of Peter

Taken from the Gospels, Acts and Peter's letters.

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Dedication

To the memory of John B. and Lillian V. Hendershot – who taught us to “pass
it on.”

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The Call - Luke 5:1-11

The Character of Peter

Luke 5:1-11 NASB Now it happened that while the crowd was pressing around Him and listening to the word of God, He was standing by the lake of Gennesaret; (2) and He saw two boats lying at the edge of the lake; but the fishermen had gotten out of them and were washing their nets. (3) And He got into one of the boats, which was Simon's, and asked him to put out a little way from the land. And He sat down and *began* teaching the people from the boat. (4) When He had finished speaking, He said to Simon, "**Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.**" (5) Simon answered and said, "Master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing, but I will do as You say *and* let down the nets." (6) When they had done this, they enclosed a great quantity of fish, and their nets *began* to break; (7) so they signaled to their partners in the other boat for them to come and help them. And they came and filled both of the boats, so that they began to sink. (8) But when Simon Peter saw *that*, he fell down at Jesus' feet, saying, "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!" (9) For amazement had seized him and all his companions because of the catch of fish which they had taken; (10) and so also *were* James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, "**Do not fear, from now on you will be catching men.**" (11) When they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed Him.

History

The story given here in Luke's account clearly indicates that there is some prior history that Luke assumes you know. In fact, this is the second time that Christ has called Peter. Peter and his brother Andrew were disciples of John the Baptist. John did not particularly attract the wealthy and influential of Palestine; in fact, the phrase "tax collectors and prostitutes" is used to describe his followers. Peter and Andrew would be what we might call today "blue-collar workers."

- ✚ These men worked with their hands every day. Being a fisherman requires some experience and probably an apprenticeship, but unless you're fly fishing in the high Rocky Mountains it's not really an intellectual endeavor.
- ✚ We also know that these men moved in the commercial circles of their day. The apostle John, who was called at about the same time, was well-known to the intellectual hierarchy of Jewish society — he was the guy who sold them the fish. That's why, on the night of Christ's trials, John was admitted into the house. Peter was not.

Virtue of Obedience

Christ's actions here are rather pragmatic. He had the problem that all public speakers did until the 20th century — how to be heard in a large crowd. He took advantage of the fact that a small boat on this lake would serve as a natural amphitheater. To put himself in the correct position to speak, however, he needed to be out on the water. Speakers in those days sat down to deliver their message; it was a way of assuming authority in your teaching. Remember, chairs were not common. The most ordinary use of a chair was as a throne, literally a seat of authority.

Be that as it may, this technique has one interesting side effect: Peter has to listen to the whole sermon. To be polite about it, he's going to have to listen intently. We can see the relationship in the matter of Christ's instructions to the fishermen. Think about: what does Jesus, the carpenter, know

about fishing? Perhaps more to the point, what does Peter think of taking instructions from a carpenter? You can see the delicacy of the situation in Peter's comment. It's not like he's giving back talk to the boss, but he does point out that the fish seem to be in some other part of the lake. Christ, however, created fish.

The core of the argument is this: Peter calls him "Master." By the best of Peter's knowledge there are no fish in that part of the lake. But he is obedient to his Master's command. This might just be why Christ likes the man so much; even when he "knows better" he still does what he is told, when he is told, how he is told. It's a good example.

I Am a Sinful Man

Peter is Jewish; no doubt he had read of Isaiah's meeting with God:

Isaiah 6:1-7 NASB In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. (2) Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. (3) And one called out to another and said, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory." (4) And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. (5) Then I said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts." (6) Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. (7) He touched my mouth *with it* and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven."

Both of these instances have a lesson for us: you don't have to be perfect to be God's chosen implement. God will deal with your sins and imperfections if you are obedient to his commands. Notice here that Jesus pays no attention to Peter's objection. He doesn't even pause to dismiss it. Instead he does two things:

- ✚ "Do not fear." The normal reaction to meeting God in all his might is absolute terror. Angels begin their discourses with the words, "fear not." God must deal with our fear before he can command our service; we are but human.
- ✚ Christ then tells Peter the service he will perform. He gives them no information on the difficulties, the sufferings, the nights of sleeping in the open in the cold or other minor difficulties.

It seems that our focus when we meet God is on our sins. His focus is on our service.

The Call

So now you have it. Peter has been called to service, to become a "fisher of men." We may now examine the nature of the call; not just Peter's, but the call for each of us.

Personal

It seems to be a consistent quality of the call of Christ that it is personal. But what's it all about?

- ✚ It's about trust. The call is personal because Christ wants a personal relationship with each of us. You cannot have an effective, continuing personal relationship without trust. If you've ever seen a marriage where there was no trust, you know the problem.

- ✚ It's about example. Modern educators (note that I did not use the word teachers) see themselves as shaping the children into a mold of political correctness, and filling their little heads with facts. This is a relatively recent development; most of human history would proclaim the idea that the teacher was to disciple the student so that the student would be like the teacher. We are to become like Christ; we are Christians — the word means little Christs.
- ✚ The way the call is usually phrased is simply this: "follow me." It is not about following a system of belief; it is not about following a collection of rules; it's about following the Son of God.

Bearing the Cross

One of my favorite authors, Thomas a Kempis, put it this way:

TO MANY the saying, "Deny thyself, take up thy cross and follow Me," (Matt. 16:24.) seems hard, but it will be much harder to hear that final word: "Depart from Me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire." (Matt. 25:41.) Those who hear the word of the cross and follow it willingly now, need not fear that they will hear of eternal damnation on the day of judgment. This sign of the cross will be in the heavens when the Lord comes to judge. Then all the servants of the cross, who during life made themselves one with the Crucified, will draw near with great trust to Christ, the judge.

Why, then, do you fear to take up the cross when through it you can win a kingdom? In the cross is salvation, in the cross is life, in the cross is protection from enemies, in the cross is infusion of heavenly sweetness, in the cross is strength of mind, in the cross is joy of spirit, in the cross is highest virtue, in the cross is perfect holiness. There is no salvation of soul nor hope of everlasting life but in the cross.

Take up your cross, therefore, and follow Jesus, and you shall enter eternal life. He Himself opened the way before you in carrying His cross, and upon it He died for you, that you, too, might take up your cross and long to die upon it. If you die with Him, you shall also live with Him, and if you share His suffering, you shall also share His glory.

There is a vast difference between being number one and number two. All loyalty centers on number one. This is a principle of leadership in any organization, including your family. If you take up the cross, you put Christ at the center of your life and make him and his commands the most important things for you. If you do this, your family and friends will be impacted; sometimes, they may even suffer for it. While would like to think that Christ's coming into our lives makes us such a better person that all would see it as good, the truth is to the contrary. Sometimes your Christianity becomes their burden. This is perfectly normal, for to the Christian Christ comes first. All else must be arranged around that. For example, your family may have to put up with you trying to evangelize them.

So how do we deal with this? The answer, as it is to so many questions, is this: "in love." We need to remember that perfect love casts out fear, including the fear of being rejected by our families. James and John left their boats at about this time too; one wonders if their father Zebedee had anything to say about it.

Discipleship

We are all different; God knows it, and therefore the call to each of us is different. I am called to teach. That involves standing in front of a group of people every Sunday morning to deliver what you have searched out during the week. To some of you reading this, such a life would seem a terror; public

speaking is worse than death. It certainly not something I'm rather glib about. But that is the call that I have. The question is not which call you get, but whether or not you answer it.

- ✚ Good work habits apply no matter what call you get. If you are called to sweep and mop the floors, timeliness and diligence still apply. If you are called to preach the gospel to millions, you have the same timeliness and diligence.
- ✚ Sometimes we think that the call is a sort of magic. Once you get the call you are to be transformed into someone very different from who you were with cosmic capabilities. I suppose that happens; it's just that I haven't seen it. Most of us grow slowly and gradually. So whatever your call is, expect to change. God will determine the rate, and he knows what you can do.

What God Will Do

It is said that a paratrooper is someone who is stupid enough to leave a perfectly good airplane to see if he has a perfectly good parachute. Many Christians have the same attitude about the call of God; they were content before they got it, and are not at all sure they want to go that direction. After all, what if God doesn't uphold his end of the bargain?

Providence

Much of God's providence depends on your point of view. Consider the fish that were caught this night: from our perspective as Christians, this is just an example of how God can and will provide for his children – his Providence. But you can also look at it another way: it tells you there are still a lot of fish left in that lake. You might look at it from a commercial point of view. The temptation is to tell God that you really don't need to call right at the moment, after all — you have all those fish to sort out.

The secret is this: **expect** God to provide. Do not doubt. Most of us think we're pretty good at this; our usual problem is that we expect God to provide – but not **that** way. We want him to provide, and also to take our advice on how to do it.

Permit me an old example. One night, many years ago, I had checked into a hotel late at night. I turned on the television; the only thing worth watching at all was a sports event, Russian weightlifting. Out came Ivan. He saw this bar full of weights and with a mighty heave put it into the air. After the applause 10 Russian soldiers came out to carry the barbell off stage. Later on Igor came out to pick up even larger barbell. He threw it into the air to great applause. Afterwards, they sent out one Russian soldier to pick up the barbell – with a forklift. Most of us are still looking for our 10 soldiers when the forklift arrives.

Promises

God, it seems, expects us to take it at his word when it comes to this matter of Providence. There are three common arguments for why we should do so; all of them revolve around the promises of God.

- ✚ The first is this: "consider the lilies." Christ in essence tells us to look around and see how God provides for everybody else. He sustains this universe that he created; gravity works the same way today that it did yesterday. Is it therefore a great and difficult thing for him to provide for you?

- ✚ Americans in particular have a difficulty with this. They look around and they see the riches of this world. It's easy to forget that riches are temporary, and so are our needs. We see wealth is a permanent solution to our provision, when it's really passing and fading.
- ✚ Finally, if it gets down to something remotely difficult, remember the fishes and the loaves?

God's Paradox

Humor is the sudden perception of the absurd. God gave us a sense of humor so we could deal with the absurd. It is a point of divine style; God is fond of paradox. Let me give you some examples:

Matthew 10:39 NASB "He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it.

1 Corinthians 3:18 NASB (18) Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, he must become foolish, so that he may become wise.

It is as if God is telling us that we have the entire perception of the universe backwards. But could it be otherwise? Could it possibly be that we are so smart and so strong as to be the equal of God? You have only to ask the question to see how absurd it is. Dealing with God cannot follow the rules we use for dealing with the rest of the universe. So it is that the things we learn all our lives long somehow don't apply when we talk with God. In fact, he condescends to us. We don't necessarily see his power and wisdom:

1 Corinthians 1:25 NASB (25) Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

Do you see it? When the call comes it seems absurd to you that any such thing could possibly work. By the world's standards, it can't. It's just that God doesn't go by the world's standards. He loves us so much that he lets us see his foolishness so that we might become wiser and greater.

Presumption

It is difficult to define the sin of presumption. Dictionaries are clogged with the legal definition (it has a specific meaning in the practice of law.) Various theological sources go on for some length. Rather than attempt to give you a solid dictionary definition, let's take it as a working item: giving good advice to God. We shall see some examples.

The Nature of Presumption

We must take this by example. I am indebted to Nave's Topical Bible for this list of examples.

We Don't Agree with What God Tells Us

It is not that we don't understand what God has told us; it's just that we think he made a mistake. Surely, if he understands the circumstances, he will approve of our edited version. For example:

- ✚ As the serpent said to Eve in the garden, did God really say that? Is that what he really meant?¹ Satan, the serpent, evidently has no qualms about misquoting the Scripture and twisting the meaning. It seems this is something sinners are rather good at.

¹ Genesis 3:1-5

- ✚ Sometimes we make God the reason we disobey him. Sound strange? Remember Jonah, the fellow who was swallowed by a whale? His excuse² was that he knew God was merciful. And God being merciful, surely he would pardon Nineveh. So what's the sense in sending Jonah when you know the answer anyway?
- ✚ At other times we substitute our own ways and means for the ones God has prescribed. Here's an example from the Old Testament:

Malachi 1:6-9 NASB " 'A son honors *his* father, and a servant his master. Then if I am a father, where is My honor? And if I am a master, where is My respect?' says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests who despise My name. But you say, 'How have we despised Your name?' (7) "*You* are presenting defiled food upon My altar. But you say, 'How have we defiled You?' In that you say, 'The table of the LORD is to be despised.' (8) "But when you present the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? And when you present the lame and sick, is it not evil? Why not offer it to your governor? Would he be pleased with you? Or would he receive you kindly?" says the LORD of hosts. (9) "But now will you not entreat God's favor, that He may be gracious to us? With such an offering on your part, will He receive any of you kindly?" says the LORD of hosts.

Whether we consider a good advice, or that we presume God will take care of things when we should, or if we just happen to have a simple cheaper substitute — it's presumption.

Close, but Not Right

Permit me a war story. One of my students many years ago was had very Pentecostal beliefs. She came in and told me that God had directed her to anoint a particular wall in her house, for reasons which I have forgotten. She announced that she was going to anoint every wall in the house. Perhaps this was the spirit of God moving, but I immediately told her not to do that. If God tells you to anoint one particular wall, anoint that wall and no others. Does this seem strange to you? Then I give to you the example of King Uzziah. For reasons not specified, he decided that he would offer incense before God's altar in the Temple.³ For his trouble, God gave him leprosy. Now, to our minds this may seem strange: after all, if a priest offers incense why can't the King? The answer simply is, because God said so. Offering incense is a good thing — but it is reserved for the priests. Do it God's way.

Sometimes we are doing something like what God wants, but not quite following his Commandments. Listen to the story of how King Saul lost his kingdom:

1 Samuel 13:8-14 NASB Now he waited seven days, according to the appointed time set by Samuel, but Samuel did not come to Gilgal; and the people were scattering from him. (9) So Saul said, "Bring to me the burnt offering and the peace offerings." And he offered the burnt offering. (10) As soon as he finished offering the burnt offering, behold, Samuel came; and Saul went out to meet him *and* to greet him. (11) But Samuel said, "What have you done?" And Saul said, "Because I saw that the people were scattering from me, and that you did not come within the appointed days, and that the Philistines were assembling at Michmash, (12) therefore I said, 'Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not asked the favor of the LORD.' So I forced myself and offered the burnt offering." (13) Samuel said to Saul, "You have acted foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the LORD your God, which He

² Jonah 4:1-4

³ Second Chronicles 26:16

commanded you, for now the LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. (14) "But now your kingdom shall not endure. The LORD has sought out for Himself a man after His own heart, and the LORD has appointed him as ruler over His people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you."

You can almost hear the excuse coming of Saul's mouth. He would say something like this: hey, the people were acting up. I had to do something. You told me to offer sacrifices; it seemed like a good time to do it. I was just being reasonable. It's a curious thing: often enough God does not want us to be reasonable. He wants us to be obedient. Reasonable people do not give money to beggars. But charity is an essential part of the Christian life.⁴

Sometimes we want to help God out. You might want to consider the example of the disciples in handling little children. Kids that size can be a real nuisance, and Jesus was really busy. So the disciples decided to help him out. They screened his callers. If you recall⁵, Jesus sternly rebuked them. He seems to be expected them to know that the children would be especially welcome. They substituted their good business judgment for the love of God.

The Issue Is the Other Guy

Well, sometimes the issue a presumption comes up in our look at other people. Let's take a look at three:

Do you remember the scene after the resurrection where Jesus meets the disciples at the lake? We focus on the redemption of Peter; but do you recall that Peter tried to distract Christ's attention by asking about the apostle John⁶? In a sense, it's the statement that reforming me is painful — therefore, let's focus on the other guy.

Sometimes it's worse. Sometimes we see someone else doing something that is an act of utter devotion to Christ, and the comparison to ourselves is rather bothersome. For example:

Matthew 26:6-9 NASB Now when Jesus was in Bethany, at the home of Simon the leper, (7) a woman came to Him with an alabaster vial of very costly perfume, and she poured it on His head as He reclined *at the table*. (8) But the disciples were indignant when they saw *this*, and said, "Why this waste? (9) "For this *perfume* might have been sold for a high price and *the money* given to the poor."

They were indignant — because Christ was honored.

Of course, the most common example is rather petty. It is rather amusing that the fellow named Diotrophes is an extremely minor character in the New Testament – precisely because he wanted to be a big shot⁷.

⁴ An interesting comparison may be made in the tax returns of the various political candidates. This was written in 2012; the more Christian the candidate, it seems, the larger the charitable deductions.

⁵ Matthew 26:8-9

⁶ John 21:20-22

⁷ Third John 1:9

Washing the Feet

We can now examine an event in the life of Peter which reflects such presumption.

John 13:3-11 NASB *Jesus*, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, (4) *got up from supper, and *laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself. (5) Then He *poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded. (6) So He *came to Simon Peter. He *said to Him, "Lord, do You wash my feet?" (7) Jesus answered and said to him, "**What I do you do not realize now, but you will understand hereafter.**" (8) Peter *said to Him, "Never shall You wash my feet!" Jesus answered him, "**If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.**" (9) Simon Peter *said to Him, "Lord, *then wash* not only my feet, but also my hands and my head." (10) Jesus *said to him, "**He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you.**" (11) For He knew the one who was betraying Him; for this reason He said, "**Not all of you are clean.**"

Why this Peter behave this way?

He Doesn't Understand the Situation

One of the keys to understanding Peter's behavior is impatience. You have to start with the fact that he does not understand the situation. From his point of view there is no teaching going on. As any parent knows, your children are always learning — even if you think you're not teaching. Peter's problem starts with the fact that he won't wait on events. Instead of letting Christ complete his work, and then asking what it meant, he presumes. He thinks he understands. In this, he makes two mistakes:

- ✚ He is more concerned with dirt than with sin.
- ✚ He is more concerned with "me" than "us."

The reason is simple: he assumes that Christ's actions have no connection to Passover. Since he is at a Passover supper, this seems rather strange. One way to avoid such presumption is to assume that our Lord is always teaching us — and we should always be asking him what the lesson is about.

He Doesn't Understand Christ

Pierre Trudeau once made a comment about the Canadian view of living next to the United States. He said it was like sleeping back to back with an elephant — really cozy, until the elephant decides to roll over. Peter, in this circumstance, has forgotten something like this. He has forgotten the awe due to the living Christ. Perhaps this comes from confusing small power with great power. Small power — as displayed by petty tyrants in offices everywhere — constantly reminds its underlings that fear is due. Great power can afford humility; small power cannot. Those of us who live with small power every day sometimes mistake humility for weakness. This is not a foot bath; it is the supreme power of the universe giving us an example.

If Peter forgets the power of Christ, he has also forgotten the mission of Christ. Christ came to establish the kingdom of God; his actions tend to that purpose. Therefore, when you see him in action, you may assume that this is for the establishment of the kingdom of God. Even in these washing your feet.

He Doesn't Understand Himself

If there is one type of person Americans cherish, it is the man of action. Particularly in the church we treat those who think as if they had nothing better to do. The person we really like is the dynamic man of action: ready, fire, aim. Peter is that kind of man. And it is a frequent occurrence that that kind of man has no understanding of himself and no idea why he has just shot off both of his feet.

There is one advantage to being a man of action: you avoid those quiet moments of the soul, in which introspection may be painful. It's sort of like avoiding your dental appointment. If nothing is hurting right at the moment, or at least not severely, the man of action says I don't need a dentist. Eventually the pain comes, and the dentist says, "I wish you had come in earlier." It's like my mother used to say: "don't do dumb things."

One other factor must be considered. It is likely that Peter, very much like your author, is not a particularly graceful individual. His social skills do not extend to the gracious way of getting out of an awkward situation. So having stuck his foot in his mouth, he keeps it there. Sometimes it's the best thing we can do.

Get Thee behind Me

Matthew 16:21-28 NASB From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day. (22) Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "God forbid *it*, Lord! This shall never happen to You." (23) But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's." (24) Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. (25) "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. (26) "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? (27) "For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and WILL THEN REPAY EVERY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS. (28) "Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom."

This is the area in which Peter gives us the clearest definition of presumption: giving good advice to God. We shall take it step by step.

Peter's Point of View

Presuming that Peter actually thought this out carefully (which I doubt), he probably reasoned it this way:

- ✚ Jesus is imbued with great power. This cannot be denied.
- ✚ Jesus is innocent. This cannot be denied.
- ✚ The innocent should not suffer. Note that this is a moral imperative.

That last is the problem. We use it as a moral guideline for things like "rules of engagement" in warfare. In general, the suffering of the innocent is to be prevented when it is possible. It's a good guideline for man; God has other responsibilities. The classic example of the suffering of the innocent in the Old Testament is Job. We might well ask why Job suffered. When asked the question God never

explained anything. We know what was going on behind the scenes, spiritually — but Job was never given such knowledge.

As Augustine said, God allows no suffering out of which he cannot bring a greater good. So in God's view, the suffering of the innocent is indeed permissible if needed to bring a greater good. The supreme example of this is the Cross. So while we can sympathize with Peter's "logic", we can also see that something greater was at work — and he should have respected it.

The Foolishness of God

Indeed, from the human point of view the problem seems to lie with God. Paul went so far as to describe this as the foolishness of God:

1 Corinthians 1:20-25 NASB (20) Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? (21) For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not *come to* know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. (22) For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; (23) but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, (24) but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (25) Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

It is a central paradox of the faith: the ultimate source of wisdom is so wise as to display his foolishness to us. If you seek the miracle, he shows you the ordinary growth of the kingdom. Changed lives? Not a miraculous thing, but a marvelous thing. Remember that Paul's readers had seen miracles. We sometimes think that if we saw miracles we would have so much more faith; those who saw them often did not. The scientific thinker, the reductionist, has a similar problem. What God does simply does not make sense to the limited mind of man. What is clear is simply this: the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The answer to "why" lies only in the love of God.

Why does God do it this way? I submit there are at least three reasons:

- ✚ First, so that we see Christ rather than the miracles. The bread of life is put before us, and often what we ask for is bread from the bakery.
- ✚ Second, so that we learn to do things God's way. This applies even if we do not understand why God wants it done that way.
- ✚ Third, that we may accept the grace of Christ and its abounding humility. Grace gives humility; knowledge puffs up.

Take up the Cross

So what should we do about it? Christ gives us the answer in this passage in three steps:

- ✚ First, deny yourself. Deliberately decide that you are not number one in your life; Christ comes first. Read the Scriptures to find out how you do this and how it applies to you, but first you must make that decision.
- ✚ Take up the Cross. If you accept self-denial, you will be handed a burden to bear. He tells you that his yoke is easy and his burden is light (for he will help you carry it), but it is still a burden. Sometimes he accompanies it with a gift of the Holy Spirit. If your gift is teaching, teach.

✚ Follow him. This is not a system of rules and regulations, but a personal devotion to Jesus Christ. It was not through the commandment and obedience that Mary Magdalene poured the perfume over Jesus' feet. It was through devotion.

The Sword of the Spirit lies before you. As Christ might say to the Airborne Ranger, "pick up your weapon, and follow me."

The Transfiguration – Various sources

Matthew	Mark	Luke	2nd Peter
<p>Matthew 17:1-9 NASB Six days later Jesus *took with Him Peter and James and John his brother, and *led them up on a high mountain by themselves. (2) And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light. (3) And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. (4) Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah." (5) While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!" (6) When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground and were terrified. (7) And Jesus came to them and touched them and said, "Get up, and do not be afraid." (8) And lifting up their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus Himself alone. (9) As</p>	<p>Mark 9:2-10 NASB Six days later, Jesus *took with Him Peter and James and John, and *brought them up on a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them; (3) and His garments became radiant and exceedingly white, as no launderer on earth can whiten them. (4) Elijah appeared to them along with Moses; and they were talking with Jesus. (5) Peter *said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah." (6) For he did not know what to answer; for they became terrified. (7) Then a cloud formed, overshadowing them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is My beloved Son, listen to Him!" (8) All at once they looked around and saw no one with them anymore, except Jesus alone. (9) As they were coming down from the mountain, He gave them orders not to relate to anyone what they had seen, until the Son of Man rose from the dead. (10) They seized upon that statement, discussing with one another what rising</p>	<p>Luke 9:29-36 NASB And while He was praying, the appearance of His face became different, and His clothing became white and gleaming. (30) And behold, two men were talking with Him; and they were Moses and Elijah, (31) who, appearing in glory, were speaking of His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. (32) Now Peter and his companions had been overcome with sleep; but when they were fully awake, they saw His glory and the two men standing with Him. (33) And as these were leaving Him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles: one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah"--not realizing what he was saying. (34) While he was saying this, a cloud formed and began to overshadow them; and they were afraid as they entered the</p>	<p>2 Peter 1:16-18 NASB For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. (17) For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, "This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased"-- (18) and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain.</p>

<p>they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man has risen from the dead."</p>	<p>from the dead meant.</p>	<p>cloud. (35) Then a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him!" (36) And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent, and reported to no one in those days any of the things which they had seen.</p>	
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The Glory of God

The subject of the glory of God often revolves about this passage. The event is unique in the gospel; the only comparable event in Acts is the appearance of Christ to Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus. It is such an impressive event that one wonders why it wasn't used more often. Perhaps the fear that it causes limits its usefulness.

More disturbing is this: it has become rare in our preaching. This is rather a new tendency; the ancient authors, up through C. H. Spurgeon, used frequently. By way of example, in the three years since our new pastor arrived, I do not recall it being mentioned. What was once considered to be a major event in the life of Christ has almost completely disappeared.

The Why Questions

The event being so unique, it generates a lot of questions — most of which start with the three-year-old's favorite word, "why?"

Why the Transfiguration at All?

It's a fair question: why did this event occur at all?

- ✚ Many authors feel that this event fulfills the prophecy that Jesus made that some of his disciples might see the kingdom of God coming in power before they died. This would not seem to be a sufficient reason, though it would make it necessary.
- ✚ More likely, it confirms to the disciples that Jesus is indeed the Son of God. Remember, this happens just about a week after Peter makes the Great Confession. It confirms that with great power; thus tending to give the disciples confidence during the approaching crucifixion.
- ✚ Indeed, it is only in the light of the cross that we can understand this. Remember, the cross was considered a shameful and humiliating death. Capital punishment was common, and one of the uses of the cross was to subject the criminal to public humiliation while he died. This was supposed to serve as a deterrent to others. In this moment of glory Jesus balances the shame of the cross with the glory of God. It is by the cross that God shows his glory through Christ.

Why the Wait between Peter's Confession and the Transfiguration?

There is a wait of about a week between the confession and the Transfiguration. Perhaps this is a subtle point, but Christ had a reason for it:

- ✚ The delay disconnects the two. So the disciples do not draw the false conclusion that being invited to the Transfiguration is a reward for the confession. This tends to reduce dissension, jealousy and contention in the disciples — of which there is already quite enough.
- ✚ It is also a lesson to us. Often enough, we make a commitment to God in an emotional moment. We then expect God to do something miraculous (or close to it) *immediately*. We expect our obstacles to disappear as if by magic. That is simply not how God works; he does things in his own time.

Why Three Disciples? Why These Three Disciples?

The simplest reason for this is that Peter, James and John are the three innermost of the disciples. They are preeminent; so if you're going to pick three, these are the three you would pick. But there are other reasons too:

- ✚ These three are the closest to Jesus, and therefore the most fearful of the prophecy concerning his death. To counter this fear he gives them a vision of what is to come.
- ✚ There is a legal point here too. In the Jewish law, the testimony of three witnesses was often required to establish a particular fact. So from the point of view of the other disciples, the fact of the Transfiguration is established by three reliable witnesses.
- ✚ The point may be made spiritually as well. There are three witnesses on the mountain top: God the Father, Moses and Elijah. So the minimum number of witnesses required is provided both in the human and spiritual sense.
- ✚ There is a point of being on the mountain top; there is a point of coming down from the mountain top. The disciples wanted to stay there, but they need to learn that the work is done in the valley below.

Why Moses and Elijah?

We must assume that Christ could have picked anyone from the Old Testament he liked. But there is a point to selecting Moses and Elijah; indeed, more than one point:

- ✚ Moses and Elijah represent, to the Jewish mind of this time, the "Law and the Prophets." By their appearance they show the supremacy of Christ over both the law and the prophets of the Old Testament.
- ✚ In addition it shows the Christ is Lord over the dead (Moses) and the living — Elijah, who never died.
- ✚ Both of these spoke with Christ discussing his pending departure (via the cross). This was to encourage Jesus, but I suspect it also encouraged the disciples somewhat too.

Why Jesus Alone?

Let's look at it from the perspective of modern man: Jesus is the last one standing. That establishes his supremacy.

Why "Tell No One?"

You might think that the disciples were to spread this news as quickly and as far abroad as possible. And that is correct — after the resurrection. This is consistent with Christ's pattern of telling people not to mention something until after the resurrection, for it might not make sense before hand.

But there is one other question you might consider. What would've happened if Judas had known about the resurrection beforehand?

Lessons from Peter

We must remember that it's been about a week since Peter made the Great Confession. There are some interesting things in his reaction to this event.

Fear

There is an interesting interplay here between Peter and Christ. The fact that Peter experiences great fear is perfectly normal under the circumstances. You will recall that about half the time when an angel appears, the first words out of his mouth are, "fear not." So this is the reaction that you and I would probably have, too. Unlike the angels, Christ deals with this fear by his calm presence. We can picture him radiating the "peace that passes understanding." He is Lord; therefore his followers need fear nothing.

Three Tabernacles

We are told that Peter didn't know what he was doing when he opened his mouth and suggested building three tabernacles (your translation may have the words "tents" or "booths.") Some scholars have suggested that this particular appearance happened about the time of the Feast of the Tabernacles, but that is not certain. What is certain is that Peter felt good being there — and probably want to stay while. More likely, however, this is Peter being Peter: take direct action whenever possible. Action, even if it is wrong. It's important to do something.

So why is it wrong? Simply this: tabernacles are for human beings, the earthly. On the mount of Transfiguration we see Christ in his spiritual form — he needs no tent.

The Original Mountain Top Experience

Why is it that Peter wanted to stay? I think we can answer that from our own experience:

- ✚ On the mountaintop we do not feel the threat or challenge to our faith that we do in the valley. We feel at ease, unchallenged.
- ✚ There is no labor, and hence no weariness, on the mountaintop.
- ✚ Modern minds will particularly understand this: there is nothing there to depress us. There are no "downers."

All of this is really good stuff — but the work to be done is down in the valley below.

Learning about Christ

This is a very concentrated event. But there are some characteristics of the Christ that we must examine.

Beloved Son

The phrase may give rise to misconception, as being misunderstood by any number of heretics. We repeat the obvious:

- ✚ Christ and the Father are the same in essence — which is existence. Both have existed forever from "before time." (Remember that time is also one of God's creations.)

- ✦ They therefore have the same attributes, such as righteousness, truth, wisdom and even love.
- ✦ The fact that God is love carries with it the clearest of ideas: Jesus must be his *beloved* son. No other relationship between the two of them can be so preeminent. The fact that Christ is the son implies his obedience; the fact that God is the Father implies their love. Love is meaningless without at least two persons; it can be argued that it is meaningless without at least three.

Well Pleased

The phrase might not mean much more than politeness to us. To the ancient Jew however it meant more; the word used for pleased has its roots in the Old Testament. There we find frequent reference to a sacrifice being a "pleasant aroma" to God. Jesus is pleasing to God the Father because he does his will – and becomes the atonement sacrifice. Such sacrifice is an essential part of the Christian life, for Christ is our example. We are Christians, which means to be a "little Christ." The imitation of Christ is the essence of the Christian life; and Christ is our sacrifice.

Hear Him

It is interesting that God adds the command to hear him. Perhaps that's because he knows that we won't unless we're told we have to. You can hear him in the Scriptures, which is why we encourage daily reading of the Bible. You can hear him in prayer – note that in Luke's account the disciples went up the mountain to pray.

Lift Him up

Perhaps it is because we so seldom read this account that we fail to give the honor and glory to Christ which is his due. But — as he told us — if he is lifted up, he will draw all men to him. The question is, will we lift him up?

Three Questions - Various Scriptures

Perhaps the reason that Christ chose Peter as the leader of the apostles was simply that he was a bold man. He apparently had the virtue that teachers often seek: he wasn't afraid to ask a question, even a stupid one.

Defilement

Matthew 15:10-20 NASB After Jesus called the crowd to Him, He said to them, "Hear and understand. (11) "It is not what enters into the mouth that defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man." (12) Then the disciples *came and *said to Him, "Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this statement?" (13) But He answered and said, "Every plant which My heavenly Father did not plant shall be uprooted. (14) "Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit." (15) Peter said to Him, "Explain the parable to us." (16) Jesus said, "Are you still lacking in understanding also? (17) "Do you not understand that everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and is eliminated? (18) "But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. (19) "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. (20) "These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man."

Tradition

If there is a distinguishing characteristic to the church in which your author attends, is this: our great tradition is that we have no traditions. We see traditions as evil, and we always seek the bold, the hip, the new, the cool and the "with it." So why is it that other societies have traditions?

- ✚ First, traditions start as the solution to a problem. Somebody had a difficulty; a solution was produced and then implemented.
- ✚ Traditions also are used to prevent the problem from coming back. Good manners have the same effect.
- ✚ In the way, tradition is the vote of the people who don't happen to be walking around on top of the planet. The brains of our ancestors are often preserved in our traditions.

So perhaps tradition is not quite as bad as we have painted it. But to understand this passage we will need to look at the traditions in Peter's time.

- ✚ The problem starts with the Mosaic law. Despite the impression which is given by reading through Leviticus, the Mosaic law is not entirely specific about every possible contingency. So the various rabbis, when confronted with a particular test case, were required to give an opinion.
- ✚ Those opinions — since they were rendered by the experts on the law — became, over time, de facto a part of that law.

Let me give you a modern example. Just after World War II, an Orthodox Jewish man sought out and found his fiancée from before the war. Both had been taken captive by the Germans. He was appalled to find that she had been tattooed with a legend which translates to, "whore for Hitler's troops." The law of Moses says that rape can occur in the city only if the woman does not cry out for help. The man then asked the rabbis whether or not it was lawful for him to marry her, under the circumstances. The rabbis ruled that her cry for help would've had no effect, and therefore she was innocent of being a prostitute. They were permitted to marry.

You can see the problem. The law is holy; it is perfect — but doesn't quite seem to cover this case. The rabbis reasoned that this was a situation like a woman being raped out in the countryside, in which the law does not require her to call out, as there would be no one to hear her. This process has been going on a long time; even in Peter's time there was quite a mass of rabbinical decisions.

Perhaps you think that we are immune to this. Let me give you a simple example: does your church use grape juice instead of wine for communion? If so, you are following a tradition that dates back to the 19th century. Check into the history and you will see that the first church to use grape juice was the Salvation Army. The idea was popularized by a grower by the name of Welch — as in, Welch's grape juice. In our own church we no longer have a worship service; we have a "weekend experience." The idea is simply that what used to be a worship service is now an appeal to your emotions (because God wants your heart.) This is been going on long enough, and is so firmly implanted that I suspect it might soon be challenged on the basis of it being traditional (and therefore suspect.) Tradition arises organically: no one actually sets out to create a tradition.

Defilement

The word itself has an interesting history. It comes from the French, and it means "to get out of line." (See the word file in the middle?) It's based on the concept that there is such a thing as righteousness independent of our own existence. It also assumes that we all know that fact. When we violate that righteousness we might feel defile. And at one time or another, all of us do violate that righteousness.

The question for modern man is whether or not the fact of defilement produces the feelings associated with it. Put shortly, do you feel "dirty?" Before the sexual revolution, most people felt this way if they had sex outside of marriage. That feeling has largely gone away, with the exception of rape. So we can have the fact of defilement without the feeling.

We can also get the feeling without the fact. For example, is your house clean enough? Are there dirty dishes lying in the sink while you are here at church? Some of us (your author is one) don't really care about this. There are others for whom this is a major failing, and they feel very guilty about it. It very much depends upon who sets the rules that drive your guilt. It also depends on whether or not you examine those rules to see if they are really the truth.

There are other ways to get a fact of defilement without the feeling.

- ✚ The most common way is the searing of the conscience. We do something so often that we simply no longer pay any attention to feelings of guilt.
- ✚ If that doesn't work, self-justification is always available.
- ✚ And in certain circumstances, we can honestly plead ignorance.

A Matter of the Heart

Dealing with defilement as a Christian is a matter of the heart (the will, that is, not the emotions.) At the root of the matter our faith is one which is grounded in love, not in fear. It is not the terror of the judgment that drives people to become Christians, it is the love of Christ shown at the

cross. Perfect love casts out fear. We may therefore examine some of the fears we have and ask if this is or isn't something which defiles.

- ✦ For many of us, we have the fear of being different. If we don't look, act and think like the people in the pew next to us, then we must somehow be inferior Christians with something to hide. The pressure to conform in church is very great. But defilement is a matter of fact, not a matter of style.
- ✦ A more potent indicator of defilement is the shame associated with it. In short, we're afraid somebody might find out. If we are hiding something we have a good chance that it is something that defiles. It is certainly something that should be examined; but remember, defilement is a fact not a feeling.
- ✦ Sometimes it's the reverse: we're afraid of not being noticed. We feel that somehow or other people should praise us for our attitude, good works, shiny new Bible or whatever. Again, examine the facts.

It's a matter of the heart, and therefore only you know the facts. But because it's a matter of the heart the inner life of the Christian matters greatly. If you want the facts to say that you are not defiled, you should practice the inner life of the Christian:

- ✦ It's a life of prayer. Remember that sin is forgiven when you ask — and you should ask in prayer. There is a good reason why the Lord's prayer has the phrase, "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."
- ✦ The inner life includes the study of the Scriptures — reading them, and then meditating on them.
Of course, the test of whether or not you are defiled can be seen in the outer world. You can look at the results in your own life and you should know. But there are some cautions here:

- ✦ This is self judgment, not the judgment of others. Just because you feel defiled over something doesn't mean that somebody else must also be. You don't know what's in their heart.
- ✦ One of the best places for this self judgment — call it self examination — is at communion. We are commanded to examine ourselves before communion; there is a reason.
- ✦ If you don't like what you see in that self-examination, do something about it.

About Peter

You have to have some sympathy for Peter here. He's been raised in a "rules and regulations" society. What he's trying to do here is to get it right. Like most of us he's trying to reconcile the old way of doing things and the new way of doing things, and it's tough. It's all the more difficult because the new method is actually quite a bit more difficult than the old one. But then again, the new one carries with it the aid of the Holy Spirit; the old one did not.

Forgiveness

Matthew 18:21-35 NASB Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" (22) Jesus *said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. (23) "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. (24) "When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. (25) "But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. (26) "So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.' (27) "And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave

him the debt. (28) "But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' (29) "So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' (30) "But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. (31) "So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. (32) "Then summoning him, his lord *said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. (33) 'Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?' (34) "And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. (35) "My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart."

About Peter

Peter is still stuck amidst the rules and regulations here. But he has learned that somehow or other they are not quite sufficient, so he has logically decided that the smart thing to do is to exceed their requirements. It is the wrong paradigm — think of it as trying to be "holier than thou" — and it's not going to work. But Christ does not condemn him for an inadequate response; instead, he enlightens them. That's typical of our Lord. We give him our best and he will show us a way to do better.

Failure to Forgive

The story is a classic one of God's mercy. One of the great mistakes that people make is to assume that our version of mercy is like God's version of mercy. It is not. God's mercy is infinite; ours is limited by our humanity. His mercy is our perfect example; we are imperfect people. God's mercy is the greatest because it is based upon the cross. We cannot duplicate that, but we can imitate that. Indeed the imitation of Christ is the working model of Christian life.

It's important to see here that if we accept God's mercy, failure to forgive is in fact hypocrisy. Think about that for a second; perhaps you thought you were just being stubborn about it, or somehow it has become a matter of principle not to forgive. But the fact is that if you are a Christian, you have accepted God's mercy. You have proclaimed to the world that you are a sinner in need of a Savior. You have accepted Jesus Christ as both Lord and Savior, and pledged yourself to imitate him. He commands you to forgive; he gives you the example of ultimate forgiveness. To refuse to forgive is hypocrisy.

Of course, the world might not notice that particular type of hypocrisy. But if you happen to proclaim the mercy of God than such hypocrisy is instantly visible.

The world's reaction to this is somewhat unfortunate:

- ✚ Most people are astonished when you forgive. They expect you to do things the world's way — at least try to get even. Forgiveness is unexpected.
- ✚ They will usually condemn you for complete lack of sense, as well.
 - Of course, that makes forgiveness a wonderful teaching opportunity.

The Other Slaves 'Reaction

In this circumstance we see the other slaves' reaction to a failure to forgive. We might take this as a model for Christians; what is it you're supposed to do when one of your fellow Christians fails to forgive — particularly in such a spectacular manner.

- ✦ They were "deeply grieved." Does the failure to forgive grieve you? Do you feel a sense of disappointment when those around you in the church refused to forgive? It is a training of the heart to know that a lack of forgiveness is deeply wrong. It's easy to understand not forgiving. That doesn't make it right.
- ✦ They reported this fact their master. A parallel to the modern Christian would be to take it to God in prayer. But be sure that you do this with the correct motives. You are seeking the correction and repentance of another Christian, not a lightning bolt from the sky.
- ✦ There is one question unanswered here: what was their reaction to the result? They went to their master seeking what seemed to them to be simple justice. As we shall see it was delivered in quite a severe form.

The Master's Options

We might make a comparison here with what God is going to do. The master in this circumstance has four options:

- ✦ He may show compassion, as he did when he was first asked to do so.
- ✦ This compassion is also shown by his intentions before being asked for mercy. He was simply going to sell slave, his wife and family, all their possessions and pocket the money as partial payment for what the man owed him. As we shall see, this is relatively merciful compared to the other options.
- ✦ A more severe option of the time (which existed throughout most of history until the 19th century) was to throw the man in jail until he paid up. As a practical matter of fact this is a life sentence. Being sold meant that you kept your family together; this option split it apart.
- ✦ The most severe option is to hand the man over to the torturers, and have him tortured until he paid up. This is a life sentence too, but much worse. Of course, the spiritual parallel is eternity in hell.

We may take this as a heavenly example. On earth, in this life, God offers us compassion. But if we will not repent we get the worst possible sentence. If we will not learn to show forgiveness, no forgiveness is shown.

Responsibility

Luke 12:41-48 NASB Peter said, "Lord, are You addressing this parable to us, or to everyone else as well?" (42) And the Lord said, "Who then is the faithful and sensible steward, whom his master will put in charge of his servants, to give them their rations at the proper time? (43) "Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes. (44) "Truly I say to you that he will put him in charge of all his possessions. (45) "But if that slave says in his heart, 'My master will be a long time in coming,' and begins to beat the slaves, both men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk; (46) the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces, and assign him a place with the unbelievers. (47) "And that slave who knew his master's will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, will receive many lashes, (48) but the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few. From everyone who has been given

much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more.

(The parable just before this concerns being ready for the return of our Lord.)

Peter's Question

Christ is in the habit of answering the question you should have asked. Some might suspect Peter here is asking that he has stumbled upon some bit of secret knowledge that only the inner circle possibly know. That's a powerful lure; but one of the aspects of Christianity is that there is no such thing as the secret knowledge. God reveals his plan to all who will listen. More likely, he was asking whether or not the severity of the judgment at the return of Christ applied to everyone, or just the leaders of the church. That's the wrong question; the right question seems to be, just how will the leaders of the church be treated, based on their actions?

Duties of Those in Charge

Notice that Christ presumes that the faithful and sensible steward, in charge of his servants, is just that: in charge. Those who rule over the church are to do just that: rule. Of course, we have the example of Christ washing the feet of his disciples to show us what servant leadership is. This does not preclude a sense of decisiveness, nor does it prevent a sense of justice. But within that framework we have the following duties:

- ✚ To "give them their rations." In short, to serve up the meat of the word is our duty. We need to remember that what we are serving up is not our own thought, but his. It's a temptation to the very intelligent to decide that their own thought is so brilliant that it needs to be added to or substituted for the mind of Christ. It's also necessary to remember the recipe: cook it to the tastes of those receiving. Some need the milk of the word; some need the meat.
- ✚ To do so "at the proper time." With appropriate apologies to Rick Warren, it is not really possible to eliminate biblical illiteracy in six weeks. It is necessary for the teachers and preachers to select that which is important at the time, without neglecting the whole. This is not a trivial concern. It is possible to preach on the subject which pleases everyone and enlightens no one. It's like sonar: if you don't hear an echo, you've lost them.
- ✚ Might we add that we are to be faithful and wise in doing this? It is good to ask what role music should play in a worship service — something which is certainly changed over the millennia. In our time, the use of modern technology is a concern. The wisdom of the serpent is called for. But we must also do this in faithfulness. Remember that what some call faithful us others call stubbornness (and others say it is stink on a paper mill — always there.)

Price of Failure

Christ defines here three types of failure:

- ✚ There is willful abuse. This is definitely abuse, the use of the church's money to eat, drink and be merry. It's the person who uses the church for his own personal gain. Please note that this does not imply that everyone who is paid a salary in the church is somehow abusing it. But if you are using it, it's a ticket to hell.
- ✚ There is neglect. This means that you know what you should be doing, and you don't do it. Christ promises you a severe beating for this, but there is some question as to whether or not this involves going to hell. It's enough to make a man believe in purgatory.

- ✚ Finally, there is ignorance. This is not as rare as you might think; there are many church denominations out there from the study of the Scriptures is a lost art. Even in those groups which prize the study of the Bible, there is always the tendency to say "people smarter than me think this..." It's a fine line to walk between avoiding ignorance and then committing hairsplitting. Still, there is some punishment for ignorance — which is a good reason to study the Scriptures.

Reward of Success

It's always good to note perils of failure, but we should also look at the rewards of success. It is not possible for us to describe what life will be like the new heaven and new Earth. The matter is probably beyond our fathoming. But we should know these two things:

- ✚ Somehow, we are to be placed in charge of all of God's possessions. I have no idea what that means, but it is obviously intended to mean something very good.
- ✚ As always, those of us who have been given much (like, for instance, Americans) will have much expected of them.

The way to make sure the boss doesn't get you goofing off — is to never goof off.

Walking on Water - Matthew 14:22-34

World View

The way people think about the world around them has changed quite a bit since the first century. This incident rarely bothered the early church fathers with its facts; today, however, modern man finds it more difficult to understand the reaction of Peter and the disciples to what happened. We need to take a trip back to the first century to see how they thought about things.

Natural World

The first thing to understand is that the world of the first century had no understanding of what we call science. Indeed, the idea that science will someday solve all our problems would have been a very strange one to them. The concept that "someone will invent something" really dates to Thomas Edison. They subscribe instead to what used to be called "natural philosophy." It means simply that one observes what goes on in nature and then reasons upon it in a logically correct manner. The idea of constructing an artificial experiment on this reality is really a later development. Peter and the other disciples would not have called it natural philosophy; they would probably have used the term "common sense."

One construct that they would have which modern man might not is that of the order of the universe. They would see the fact that the universe continues to behave in an orderly way (the laws of nature) as a reflection of the character of God, the creator. Since God is eternal, they would logically reason that the laws of nature remained the same. Curiously, modern man rejects the notion of God but retains the concept of the laws of nature. This is a logical inconsistency — but it is a modern one.

Geometry and Arithmetic

The disciples would certainly have an understanding of geometry and arithmetic. Arithmetic, of course, would be in common use for commercial transactions. We know from tax records that the people of this time were quite capable of dealing with all the concepts of arithmetic that we have. Geometry was a legacy of the Greek conquest of the area some 400 years earlier. The disciples would have had a rough working knowledge of Euclid's geometry, particularly as it applied to the construction of homes and other small buildings. One particular thing of interest to us in the story would be their abilities at navigation. It is unlikely that any of the disciples had a detailed knowledge of Ptolemy's *Almagest*. The reason is simple: the Sea of Galilee is just too small for such navigation to be of any importance.

Murphy's Law

One thing in which they would not share our ideas would be in the matter of why bad things happen, and why they happen to you. They would see bad things happening because this is a fallen world. If anyone was to be at fault, the man's name would be Adam. The concept of original sin had not yet been devised (thank you, Saint Augustine), but they would see the actions of Satan and Adam as being primarily responsible for why things go wrong in a bad way.

The question of why bad things happen to you, in particular, they would see like this:

- ✦ Bad luck would always be a factor. Being in the wrong place at the wrong time would be seen as bad luck.
- ✦ Most commonly with the Jews, if the consequences were severe then obviously you deserved them. You sinned; you earned what happened to you.
- ✦ What might strike you as really unusual is this: it could also be that your nation or tribe earned it. This sense of national sin is almost unknown in our world today — even though it is quite clearly a biblically correct concept.

Miracles

We should remember that the disciples have seen several miracles by this point. Moreover, they are familiar with the miracles of the Old Testament — particularly those associated with Moses. So the existence of miracles would not be something which they would automatically doubt, but accept. As far as I can tell, they would have no particular theory about why miracles should or should not occur. They would see them as being personal to God — and God need not explain anything to them.

Spiritual World

Demons and Angels

The disciples would have no particular problem with the existence of demons and angels. They would view angels as messengers of God, not independent spirits like Greek gods. Angels were, in their view, both rare and fearsome. Demons, on the other hand, are angels in rebellion against God — and are therefore independent spirits. It's important for us to distinguish between the Jewish view and the Greek view. The Jewish view is that Greek gods are demons, not myths as we would see them today. In addition, they would know that demons are common — everyone in their society has seen someone who is demon possessed, so they have no reason to doubt their existence. If you'd like to see the same view, talk to a missionary who works in the Third World. You will find that demons are very real and very active. Satan is the father of lies — and his lie to us is that neither he nor his demons exist.

Ghosts

The concept of a ghost was quite common in those days. They are the spirits of those who are dead. It was not unusual to have an encounter with a ghost — usually a terrifying encounter. The Jew was strictly warned against consulting the dead. Therefore, the disciples would flee from a ghost, and certainly be frightened of it.

Dreams

Today, most of us would attempt to interpret our dreams in some sort of pseudo-Freudian way. The disciples would not have done this; they would have seen dreams as being significant. Dreams, and their culture, were often considered to be prophetic. If you want a humorous interpretation of this, remember the dream sequence from *Fiddler on the Roof*. The reaction that everyone had to that dream would have been typical for the disciples of this time. Dreams were often presumed to come from God to give you guidance; remember that the Wise Men were warned in a dream about Herod. Most important of all, they would've seen dreams as something to which great attention need be paid. Remember Pilate's wife?

God

The disciples' view of God stems from the fact that they would consider the Jews to be the chosen people of God. I once met such a Jew in an elevator at UCLA. Without even speaking to him, he opened up and proclaimed to me that as a Gentile I was fit only as fodder for the fires of hell. He told me that only the Jews would go to heaven and that the rest of us were worthless people who should not even be touched. I looked at the yarmulke, the tassels, the prayer shawl and the rest of it – and got off the elevator as quickly as possible. What possessed him to talk to me at all I do not know. But his attitude would've been typical of the Jews of the first century.

In their view all the Gentiles — anyone who was not a Jew — were people to be shunned. A good Jew would have nothing to do with him — and frankly would not care what happened to them.

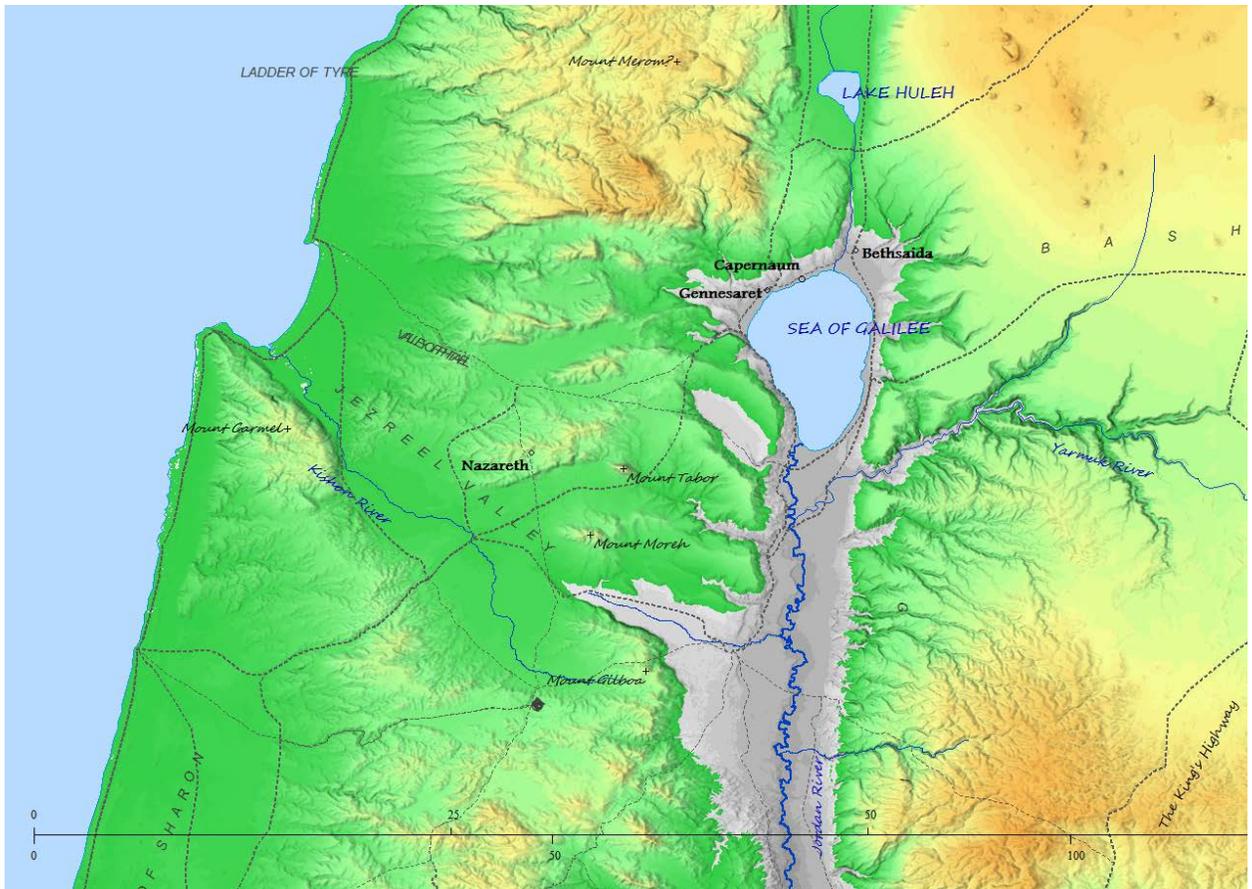
The two aspects of the Old Testament that would be important for them would be the law and the prophets. The Law of Moses they would understand fairly well, at least in a rough working sense. Prophecy, on the other hand, was rather murky. They knew the Messiah was coming, they knew some of the details, but the entire picture was not necessarily clear to them.

So here's what happened:

Matthew 14:22-34 NASB Immediately He made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side, while He sent the crowds away. (23) After He had sent the crowds away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone. (24) But the boat was already a long distance from the land, battered by the waves; for the wind was contrary. (25) And in the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea. (26) When the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. (27) But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "**Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid.**" (28) Peter said to Him, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." (29) And He said, "**Come!**" And Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus. (30) But seeing the wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" (31) Immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him, and *said to him, "**You of little faith, why did you doubt?**" (32) When they got into the boat, the wind stopped. (33) And those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, "You are certainly God's Son!" (34) When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret.

Background

A look at a map will be useful to understanding what happens this night.



As you can see from the scale on the map, the Sea of Galilee is not really that large. It's a good size lake, but not much more. What you might not notice is that the Sea of Galilee is situated in the Jordan River Valley. That valley channels the winds so that a storm blows almost due south. The last recorded location we have for Jesus and the disciples is at Nazareth. Depending on whose account you read, the disciples' destination is one of the cities at the north end of the lake. Since Nazareth is to the south, it makes sense that the disciples would be rowing upwind.

Christ's Actions

Understanding that, we can see how the disciples must've been puzzled by Christ's instructions. By all accounts he had to order them into the boat. They were then sent ahead into the storm. This of course raises the question of how Jesus — who was going up onto a mountain to pray alone — was going to get to the north end of the lake. Sensible people go by boat; it's much faster under normal circumstances. Jesus doesn't have a boat — but he does have a long path around the lake. So it is logical to suspect that the disciples knew that Jesus had something else in mind — but it stretches the imagination a bit too much to think that they expected him to walk on water. This points up a common difficulty with Christ: he seldom, if ever, explains his future plans. When you are God, you can do that.

Christ Doesn't Make It Easy for Them

You must remember that the sailing technology of the time did not include anything like the sails we have today. At this time they would've used a square, Roman sail. This means they could not

tack upwind. So they either sail a very indirect course, or they row a lot. If Luke's account is of the same incident, the boat was in distress at the time. Either way, they were at it all night.

Why does Christ do this? There are a number of reasons:

- ✚ First, times of trial awaken the hardened heart. C. S. Lewis once said that God whispers in our pleasures, but shouts in our pains. We seldom asked what we're doing right when things are going well. It's obvious that we should ask what's going wrong when things are not.
- ✚ There is also the question of memory. Pleasant times are vaguely remembered, but our troubles are sharp in our mind even years later. If our troubles are sharp, then usually the comfort we get from him remains sharp in our memories too.
- ✚ If we experience enough of these trials, we will develop the habit of longing for the comfort of Christ in such times. He wants us to develop such a habit.

Peter and Christ

Peter

Perhaps the first thing we should point out is that Peter is in an exceptional situation. He's not really sure that it's Jesus he is seeing. He's not sure it's Jesus; but he is sure *of* Jesus. Moreover, he is willing to find out if it's Jesus — that is, he's not willing to wait upon events. He wants to know if it's really him. Note, please, that Peter is not trying to learn how to walk on water.

The issue is the Lordship of Jesus. Peter does not have a buddy-buddy relationship with Christ. That's why he will not leave the boat without a command. At first this sounds like he doesn't have the confidence or courage needed. That's not the problem at all. So he has the guts to ask to be commanded. The issue is not, "can Jesus do this?" The issue is, "is this Jesus?" There is a lesson here for us. Sometimes we need the command of Christ. We should have the guts to ask for it. The reason most of us don't is that we're afraid we may have to follow it.

So what went wrong? We often think of doubt as the enemy of faith; here we see something different. Fear is the enemy of faith. Note that the fear in question is caused by rather ordinary events — things like wind and waves. Not only are these ordinary events, they are well within the commonplace experience of a fisherman like Peter. He is not confronted with something new in the way of physical events. He is letting the ordinary get in the way of the extraordinary power of Christ. Think how often that happens to you; do the little things of each day bar you from doing the great things Christ wants you to do each day? Fear and faith are both decisions.

Christ

May I point out one thing first? The first reaction Christ has is to pull Peter out of the water. I conclude from this two important points:

- ✚ It is in the very nature of Christ that all who call upon his name shall be saved — in this case, physically. Christ could've told him, "Swim back to the boat."
- ✚ It is also quite the case that the theology comes after the storm. When we are in the midst of crisis, should we not refrain from criticizing? Help first; lessons later.

Of course, Christ does expect Peter's faith to be prepared — which it was not. For this, Christ chides Peter. Interestingly, he does not criticize Peter for his fears, but for his lack of faith.

Reading the parallel accounts, it is clear that Christ enters the boat and then calms the storm. By John's account, we know that just after he does that the boat arrives at its destination. The test of faith is often followed by the calm after the storm. Sometimes being a hero means just lasting a little longer in the storm.

The Other Disciples

I suppose we can't really criticize them for this, but did you notice that the worship of the son of God comes only after the calm in the storm?

There are some personal notes here as well. All four Gospels contain some account of this incident, though Luke's account may be of the second, separate instance. Only Matthew tells the story of Peter walking on the waves. It's particularly interesting that Mark does not — for Mark is a student of Peter's. It's as if he doesn't want to embarrass Peter. Luke and John are quite discreet about it; perhaps we might conclude that Peter objected to Matthew's account. As it does not present him in a very favorable light, this may be seen as a normal human reaction.

Mark does share one thing with this: he tells us that the disciples had not gained any insight from the miracle of the loaves and the fishes (which immediately preceded this instance.) We may conclude from this that Christ wants our hearts open to his lessons in every circumstance — and that perhaps the reason we don't understand what's going on today is that we did not try to draw any lessons from what went on yesterday.

Perhaps we can best summarize it this way: Peter is a leader who falters at the last moment. That should not take away from the fact that he dared to ask for the Lord's command when the others were silent. That's the mark of a leader who needs just a little work. It's surprising how many people don't think you need courage to be a leader. And, it's sad. As for the disciples, they saw what God did but they failed to read the lesson in the events. Perhaps that's the biggest difference between our world and theirs: they knew that they should have been reading those lessons. We seem to think there are no lessons to be found.

Who Do You Say? - Matthew 16:13-20

Peter and the Keys

We begin with the Scripture:

Matthew 16:13-20 NASB Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He was asking His disciples, "**Who do people say that the Son of Man is?**" (14) And they said, "Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." (15) He *said to them, "**But who do you say that I am?**" (16) Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (17) And Jesus said to him, "**Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven.**" (18) "**I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.**" (19) "**I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.**" (20) Then He warned the disciples that they should tell no one that He was the Christ.

Modern Views

Perhaps no portion of Scripture has inadvertently produced more division in the kingdom of heaven than this one. We may briefly summarize the problem:

- ✚ The Roman Catholic view has hardened into the idea that only the Roman Catholic Church is the "authentic" church. This passage is used to justify the idea that only the Pope can pronounce with infallibility on the truth of the Christian faith. As you can imagine, this has made ecumenical dialogue somewhat difficult. The phrase you will hear used to describe this is "apostolic succession." It means that only the lineal descendent of Saint Peter (as Bishop of Rome) is the head of the church. This, of course, implies that the Congregational method of governance is morally wrong. There is a great deal more to this; however, this summary should be sufficient for our purposes in this lesson.
- ✚ The Eastern Orthodox and Protestant view is, as you would imagine, quite different. Their view is that the authentic church is founded upon the confession, not Peter. In other words, the bed rock of the church is the revelation that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the Son of the living God. We shall trace the history of this view in a moment.

Complicating this matter is the history of something called the "Pseudo-Isadoran Decretals." This collection of alleged church decisions is a forgery created in the ninth century. Scholars of all religious persuasions today accept the fact that this is a forgery. However, throughout most of church history the Roman Catholic Church had maintained that these are genuine, authentic documents. The original intent of the author was to strengthen the hands of the local bishops within his kingdom. He did so, however, by indicating that this was church law as confirmed by the Pope in Rome. When the papacy needed support for its claim to be the one and only ruler of the church, this forgery was very convenient. It should be noted that all the individuals involved believe that the documents were authentic; the fraud rests entirely with the author. It is ironic that the net result was not to strengthen the hand of the local bishop, but weaken it — the exact opposite of his intent. In the 15th century this document was exposed as a forgery. The man exposing it was promptly persecuted by the Roman Catholic Church. Eventually the issue became part of the Protestant Reformation, where it was seen as evidence of papal duplicity. The net result was that papal infallibility was proclaimed in 1868 (retroactive

to the beginning of the church) and is still part of Roman Catholic doctrine today. Since then this doctrine has been maintained as being justified on other grounds. This, too, has made ecumenical dialogue somewhat difficult.

Ancient Views

The view that this supports the Pope as the infallible head of the church is not an ancient one, but it does have its roots in antiquity. We may cite two instances which gives some idea of the development of the idea itself. The first is from Chrysostom, approximately 400 A.D.:

Chrysostom.: That is, On this faith and confession I will build my Church. Herein shewing that many should believe what Peter had confessed, and raising his understanding, and making him His shepherd. (This is as quoted from the Catena Aurea by Thomas Aquinas, which would seem to imply his approval.)

The second comes from Saint Augustine, about 100 years later:

Aug., Retract., i, 21: I have said in a certain place of the Apostle Peter, that it was on him, as on a rock, that the Church was built. but I know that since that I have often explained these words of the Lord, "Thou art Peter, and on this rock will I build my Church," as meaning upon Him whom Peter had confessed in the words, "Thou art Christ, the Son of the living God;: and so that Peter, taking his name from this rock, would represent the Church, which is built upon this rock. For it is not said to him, Thou art the rock, but, "Thou art Peter." But the rock was Christ, [1 Cor 10:4] whom because Simon thus confessed, as the whole Church confesses Him, he was named Peter. Let the reader choose whether of these two opinions seems to him the more probable.

One might well ask why this shift in view. How is it that Chrysostom can be so certain that the passage refers to the confession, and Augustine does not? The answer lies somewhat in history. In A.D. 477 the city of Rome was sacked, and the Western Roman Empire fell. This left a power vacuum in Rome which was filled by the Pope. It was clear that the Pope's authority could not possibly be based upon the ancient Roman Empire itself, but it could be based on the idea that the Roman Empire's thought was continued in the church — and the arbiter of that thought was the Pope. If you will, the Pope needed the help at the time.

You must not think that this was a naked power grab on the part the Pope. The intention here was the unity of the church. The Bishop of Rome was already recognized as one of the five patriarchs of the church (the others being at Constantinople, Antioch, Alexandria, and Jerusalem.) As it turned out, the others would eventually be overrun by Islam. This combination of historical events has led to the divergence of view referenced.

Real Issue

Underlying all this there are some real issues which still trouble the church today:

- ✚ First, there is the unity of the church. In the mystic sense there is only one church; it is based upon the confession Peter made. That is to say, it is based on the fact that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of

God, the Messiah. But it is also clear that the church is greatly divided. Your author has no immediate solution to this problem.

- ✚ Second, there is the peace of the church. The disciples of Christ are to be known by the way they love one another, not by how they squabble about doctrine.
- ✚ Third — and this may be a new thought for evangelical Christians — there is the question of how the church is to be organized. Remember that democracy, particularly parliamentary democracy, is a relatively new development. The church is not. By what contemporary idea we are to govern the eternal church is an open question.

Binding and Loosing

The Problem

The problem may be seen in verse 19:

Matthew 16:19 ISV I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you prohibit on earth will have been prohibited in heaven, and whatever you permit on earth will have been permitted in heaven."

I have quoted this from an unusual version of the Bible, which is still being translated. If you look at the second sentence you will see that the verb tenses are different than in most translations. As best as my commentaries have it, this would be the most accurate *literal* translation. It gives us a little bit of light on the basic problem:

- ✚ Clearly, authority on Earth is given to the church. In particular, the authority to forgive sins is given to the church on behalf of Christ. It is of course a major debate as to how that authority is to be exercised. It is also debate as to how far that authority extends; for example, with what authority should the church speak on the subject of contraception?
- ✚ Just as clearly, the church is in submission to Jesus Christ. She is therefore not permitted to run off into new doctrine at her own whim, but the follow the commandments of her Lord. The question immediately arises how that is to be done.
- ✚ So, just what is it that the church is authorized to do?

Concepts to Ponder

The problem is not at all trivial. Let me give you three examples of how this question of the authority of the church plays out:

- ✚ Is the church perfect? Is your doctrine such that it can have no mistakes? The classic solution to this problem is what is called indefectibility. Simply put, it means that the Holy Spirit will not allow the church to *remain* in error. In other words, eventually the ship turns to the right course. This still leaves us with the problem of recognizing the right course.
- ✚ There is also the concept of the will of God. Does this mean merely what God wants, or does it mean that whatever happens is the will of God? What happens when we follow what we think is the right doctrine and get the wrong results?
- ✚ For that matter, can we change what God does? Is the universe deterministic, or is there free will? Are human beings just moist robots? We are taught to pray; James tells us that prayer is effective. So have we changed God's mind when we pray?

Perhaps the question of the authority of the church is not so trivial as we make it.

Do What You Can Do

If you think that this author is going to solve all those problems for you in the next paragraph, you are on the wrong webpage. But there are certain things that we can do to good effect:

- ✚ The first is to be obedient to Christ, as revealed to us in the Scriptures. Sometimes the best thing to do is to let somebody else worry about the theology.
- ✚ Be as cooperative as you can (at peace with all men, as far as it is within you.) As the writer of Hebrews put it:

Hebrews 13:17 NASB Obey your leaders and submit *to them*, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

- ✚ On the premise that prayer does change things, ask God for a light for your path. It's tough enough to walk the path in light.

It is difficult enough to maintain the unity of the church in the face of grave doctrinal splits; we should certainly not divide the church over trivial ones.

Who?

We must now deal with the center of the passage: who do you say that He is?

Who Do Men Say?

It's been 2000 years and the answer that question has changed a little bit. But we still have some very wrong ideas about who this man Jesus of Nazareth is:

- ✚ It's still a common opinion that Jesus is some sort of myth. The theory is largely discredited among scholars (except the Jesus Seminar), but it's still popular with people who don't want to investigate anything. It relieves them of the responsibility of facing the truth.
- ✚ Perhaps you never thought of it this way, but many people see Jesus as a talisman. Somehow having a crucifix or other image of Jesus magically protects you from evil. This usually goes along with the idea that you must recite certain prayers word for word. What you're doing is chanting a magic formula in front of your magic icon. Neither works.
- ✚ The most common idea, and perhaps the most ignorant, is that Jesus was a good teacher, a good man — but nothing like God. The only problem with this thought is that it is patently, obviously false.

The simple form of dealing with that last bullet came from C. S. Lewis. It is usually shortened to the phrase, "liar, lunatic or Lord." Either Jesus of Nazareth was the greatest liar of all time (which for all practical purposes makes him Satan), or he was a nut case beyond any imagining today, or he is who he claims he is: the Son of the Living God. He did not give you any other choices, and he did not intend to.

Who Do You Say?

The disciples, of course, knew Jesus much better than the crowd did. It is fitting that Peter, the de facto leader of the disciples, answers for the rest of them. In his reply, Jesus tells us something about the nature of truth: it is first revealed. We might take it in three steps:

- ✚ Concerning spiritual things, the truth is first revealed. It is given to us by God because there is no other way to get it right. We can get close with our understanding of the universe, but understand really what God is telling us — well, He has to tell us. The difference between the right word and almost the right word is the difference between lightning and lightning bug.

- ✚ Once it is revealed, it must be taught. This is simple enough because God usually reveals his truth only to one person at a time — and then charges that person with teaching the rest of us.
- ✚ As any teacher can tell you, once the truth is taught it must be experienced. You have to go out and live the truth, otherwise you have wasted your time and missed the point entirely.

Revelation can be a blessing. Anyone who's ever taken algebra knows that having the answers to half the problems in the back of the book makes solving the other half a lot easier.

What is the revelation?

Permit me, then, to finish this lesson by stating what I believe this revelation is. Here is the core of the Christian faith in the Great Confession:

- ✚ Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the Messiah, the one promised to deliver the Jewish nation from the oldest pages of the Old Testament.
- ✚ He is, in addition, God in the flesh, the Son of God.
- ✚ If we might look ahead, and it would only be one verse, this Jesus was crucified so that you and I might have salvation by grace.
- ✚ That's not the end of the story: the resurrection is just the first event of the new creation which will arrive with his second coming.

This I believe; this I will defend; this I will die for.

Friday Night Fright - Various Scriptures

Washing the Feet

John 13:1-17 NASB Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He would depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end. (2) During supper, the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, *the son* of Simon, to betray Him, (3) *Jesus*, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, (4) *got up from supper, and *laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself. (5) Then He *poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded. (6) So He *came to Simon Peter. He *said to Him, "Lord, do You wash my feet?" (7) Jesus answered and said to him, "**What I do you do not realize now, but you will understand hereafter.**" (8) Peter *said to Him, "Never shall You wash my feet!" Jesus answered him, "**If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.**" (9) Simon Peter *said to Him, "Lord, *then wash* not only my feet, but also my hands and my head." (10) Jesus *said to him, "**He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you.**" (11) For He knew the one who was betraying Him; for this reason He said, "**Not all of you are clean.**" (12) So when He had washed their feet, and taken His garments and reclined *at the table* again, He said to them, "**Do you know what I have done to you?** (13) "**You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for *so* I am.** (14) "**If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.** (15) "**For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you.** (16) "**Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor *is* one who is sent greater than the one who sent him.** (17) "**If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.**

Background

It is useful for us to review the customs of the time. Indoor plumbing as we know it did not yet exist, though the Romans did develop a fairly extensive system based on lead pipes. In this time you took a bath at a public bathhouse; you walked home and then the lowest servant in the house would wash the dust from your feet. Similarly, if you arrived at a house after a long walk it was courteous to have the slave wash your feet. The task was always assigned to the lowest ranking slave.

In this, Christ exhibits the Christian characteristic of servant leadership. The paradigm is relatively simple: he who is ruler of all is servant of all. For in the kingdom authority only comes with responsibility, and responsibility implies service. Americans who are old enough can remember a time when those employed by the government were referred to as "public servants."

In so doing, Christ teaches servant leadership by example. He also teaches, symbolically, the concept of repentance after baptism.

Peter's Reaction

Peter's reaction is instructive. We may begin by noting that he addresses Jesus as, "Lord." The key to having a successful personal relationship with anyone starts with understanding who they really are. As Christ says, he is teacher and Lord. Peter acknowledges this.

The core of Peter's reaction, however, is that of surprise. We may take this in one of two ways:

✦ Peter is surprised that Christ washes his feet. It would have been more ordinary to have one of the lower ranking disciples do this.

✦ He is also surprised that Christ washes his feet.

Just before this episode takes place, the disciples have been arguing about who will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. I think this explains Peter's surprise; he was expecting Christ to establish some sort of hierarchy among the disciples. But once he sees what Christ is doing he reacts typically: with misplaced enthusiasm. There are two reasons for this:

✦ First, Peter is a man who reacts with his heart, not with his head. If there is a thinker amongst the disciples, it is the apostle John.

✦ Like many of us, Peter does not see the symbolism. He is open to understanding the literal meaning of any action, but any greater significance seems to take him a bit of time. He is not ready to see the symbolic side of Christ.

That last thought may be disturbing to you. It is a common thing in the church in America today to insist that symbolic communication does not exist inside the confines of the church building. This is absurd; think about communion. But I can remember one worship leader telling us that there were no rituals in our church – as she was preparing us for communion. We seem to be rather prejudiced against the idea that anything in the church could have something other than literal meaning. Christ, however, was very comfortable with symbolic meaning as a means of teaching. Sometimes, it's the only way we can actually understand everything we need to know.

Lessons

We may take away some lessons from this little episode:

✦ First, there is the concept of Lordship. If you are Christian, you have accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. Savior we understand; Lord takes a little more work. It means we are to obey his commands. As he said, if you love him you will keep his commandments. The rule is simple: obey, even when you don't understand.

✦ From the fact that this is the first time, evidently, that Jesus has done this we may conclude that there is virtue in waiting upon the Lord's timing. The lesson needed to be taught; but it was best taught at this particular time. We are in a hurry; we want everything now. Sometimes, our Lord knows that's the wrong answer.

✦ Finally, the servant is not above the master. His authority is complete; ours is partial. That explains why our responsibilities are partial and our service is likewise. But if our Lord stooped to the position of the lowest servant, then it should be clear to all Christians that any service for Christ is a privilege. No matter how low it goes, we are still not greater than him.

In the Garden

Matthew 26:36-46 NASB Then Jesus *came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and *said to His disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." (37) And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed. (38) Then He *said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me." (39) And He went a little beyond *them*, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will." (40) And He *came to the disciples and *found them sleeping, and *said to Peter, "So, you *men* could not keep watch with Me for one hour? (41) "Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation;

the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." (42) He went away again a second time and prayed, saying, "My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done." (43) Again He came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. (44) And He left them again, and went away and prayed a third time, saying the same thing once more. (45) Then He *came to the disciples and *said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Behold, the hour is at hand and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. (46) "Get up, let us be going; behold, the one who betrays Me is at hand!"

What Does Christ Ask?

Make we begin with the simplest of points: just exactly what is it that Christ asked his disciples to do?

- ✚ First, he asked them to "keep watch." Those who have been in the military will understand the concept of "standing a watch" or being on guard duty. The requirements are relatively simple: stay awake, be alert and look out for trouble. Raise the alarm if you see any. It doesn't sound like too much to ask, but until the invention of the electric light bulb it was very hard; the soldier on guard duty wanted to go to sleep because he had always slept when the sun went down.
- ✚ Next, he asked them to pray – to avoid temptation. Some of us treat temptation like a thrill ride; it's really more along the lines of unexploded ordnance. Apparently, the disciples fell asleep before this could be done.

Their failure to do this doesn't seem to be one of intention; the spirit is willing. Sometimes the bodily discipline simply isn't there; even the strongest bodies can get weary. Night owls may not understand this, but some of us would sleep when it gets dark — even if there are explosions going off.

Why Does Peter Fail?

The root of failure for the Christian starts with self reliance. We trust in our own vision; we make promises based on what we think we can do without consulting the truth. It's normal for the human being to make promises — particularly in moments of great emotion. But those promises are made on the basis of emotion, not on the basis of facts. We seldom have the dispassive nature to look at the sour reality of life and say, "you know, I'm not sure I can do that." We'd much rather be optimistic; we go to seminars where people tell us that if we can imagine it, we can do it. That may work very well for meeting sales quotas. But it doesn't work very well for dealing with God.

As mentioned above, the root of a personal relationship is in knowing who the other person is. But the branch must be the knowledge of who you, yourself, are. Knowing your own limitations and failures keeps you from making promises you can't fulfill — and also guide you in prayer to ask for those faults and failures to be remedied. Most of us don't like to do that.

The Sword Incident

John 18:10-11 NASB Simon Peter then, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear; and the slave's name was Malchus. (11) So Jesus said to Peter, "Put the sword into the sheath; the cup which the Father has given Me, shall I not drink it?"

We may examine this incident only briefly. In fact, we need only two words: anger, and fear. That's what's driving Peter; what drives Christ is love. It completely explains the difference in their reaction.

Lessons

We can walk away from this night in the garden with some lessons too:

- ✚ There is a difference between promises and commitment. A promise guarantees that you're going to do something; the commitment guarantees that you're going to do it or die trying. In our society the two seem to have become disconnected. Particularly in matters sexual, we make promises rather lightly. Commitment seems extraordinarily rare. It appears that we understand the difference quite well — we just want the sex without commitment. It's the same in the rest of your life as well; an empty promise is just that: empty.
- ✚ There are two well-known reactions to fear. The first one is to say, "perfect love casts out fear." The second is to say, "perfect fear casts out cowardice." It all depends on what's driving you. If your main concern is your love for others, there is no room for fear. If your main concern is for your own reputation, then fear is a great motivator to keep your reputation intact.
- ✚ Sometimes, you are not in control. Sometimes you're not in control of yourself; sometimes you are not in control of the situation; often enough, you are not in control of the results. All these things are amenable to prayer — beforehand.

Three Denials

Mark 14:66-72 NASB As Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest *came, (67) and seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him and *said, "You also were with Jesus the Nazarene." (68) But he denied *it*, saying, "I neither know nor understand what you are talking about." And he went out onto the porch. (69) The servant-girl saw him, and began once more to say to the bystanders, "This is *one* of them!" (70) But again he denied it. And after a little while the bystanders were again saying to Peter, "Surely you are *one* of them, for you are a Galilean too." (71) But he began to curse and swear, "I do not know this man you are talking about!" (72) Immediately a rooster crowed a second time. And Peter remembered how Jesus had made the remark to him, "**Before a rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times.**" And he began to weep.

Entry

Of course, the question to be answered is always, "why?" Why is it that Peter denies his Lord just to get entry into the courtyard? The denial serves to getting into the courtyard and thus overcomes a hurdle. There are, I suggest, two possible reasons:

- ✚ The first is curiosity. Things have been happening at a rapid pace, and Peter probably has not had the chance to take it all in yet. We know that the disciples did not understand about the crucifixion and resurrection to come. Peter simply wants to know what's going on. He probably rationalized it to himself that this was a little white lie, hurting no one, which would get him closer to Jesus.
- ✚ The second reason is quite simple also: everybody wants to be one of the guys. We don't want to be the oddball, the strange person, or the nerd, the geek, the weirdo. It's a part of human behavior that sometimes we must overcome.

Needs

If you, the reader, have never spent part of a night in the Western Desert of the United States, this may come as a surprise. Deserts are supposed to be hot, and when the sun is up they usually are. But when the sun goes down they get cold in a hurry. That scene that you always see of the cowboys

huddled around the fire is not just one in the romantic imagination of the artist. Your hands are freezing in the desert at night.

This does not excuse the denial, of course. But perhaps it explains it. Peter has a choice: he could deny himself, or he can deny Christ (play on words intended.) The attitude here is that he must do everything himself, he cannot rely on God – and therefore another little white lie will get him near the fire.

There is a sense in which we all seek for this: we all seek security. When the times are tough, and the emotions are high, it really helps to have God with skin on. Do you notice that Peter is alone here? Evidently the apostle John was admitted to the household as being familiar, probably from selling them fish from the Sea of Galilee. Would he have done the same thing if the rest of the disciples were there? Perhaps this is an example for us, an injunction against leaving someone alone to wrestle with doubt and fear.

Pain and Suffering

There are two really good ways to induce pain and suffering of an emotional type:

- ✚ One is to exclude the person from the group.
- ✚ The other is to humiliate the person in the group.

Peter at this point has denied his Lord twice; a third denial seems like a small thing. He is alone and about to be excluded — or he can be humiliated in the group. Peter is a social animal, he is not a loner. This failure is one of the reasons why Christ has provided the church for us. He knows our weaknesses, and he knows that sometimes when our weaknesses are combined we can strengthen one another.

Lessons

May I suggest to you three simple lessons from Peter's denials:

- ✚ First, think what the word "social" means to most of us. We don't suffer alone very well; we don't face the unknown when we're alone if we can help it. May I suggest that we err on the side of reaching out and including people rather than worrying about whether or not they will feel offended at the invitation?
- ✚ Think first. Most of us can get in any amount of trouble we want to just by not thinking. Be prepared for the situation should know are coming; think about how you're going to handle it.
- ✚ When you see a fellow Christian suffering, reach out and support them.

Boundary Layer - John 20:1-8

In the world of physics there is an extremely useful method which goes by the general name of the "boundary layer." It simply means that much can be learned by studying the point at which a transition is made. On Easter Sunday Peter went through a boundary layer. Before Easter he is a despairing man bearing a great deal of shame. After the scene at the Sea of Galilee he is a redeemed man. But hidden in plain sight is the boundary layer: Easter Sunday. Usually, little thought is given to Peter's actions or words on this day. Indeed, the Gospels record rather little about his actions. But what little there is can be seen to be the seed of the man who was to become Peter.

Run to the Tomb

John 20:1-8 NASB Now on the first *day* of the week Mary Magdalene *came early to the tomb, while it *was still dark, and *saw the stone *already* taken away from the tomb. (2) So she *ran and *came to Simon Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and *said to them, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him." (3) So Peter and the other disciple went forth, and they were going to the tomb. (4) The two were running together; and the other disciple ran ahead faster than Peter and came to the tomb first; (5) and stooping and looking in, he *saw the linen wrappings lying *there*; but he did not go in. (6) And so Simon Peter also *came, following him, and entered the tomb; and he *saw the linen wrappings lying *there*, (7) and the face-cloth which had been on His head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself. (8) So the other disciple who had first come to the tomb then also entered, and he saw and believed.

Status of Women

It is difficult for the modern Christian to understand the change in the status of women from the time of the Scriptures until today. Until the Industrial Revolution most women would clearly have understood the difficulty the women at the tomb had. We may examine some of the changes, which might explain why the apostles had such great difficulty in thinking the women were anything but babbling, emotional idiots.

- ✚ Women were much more sheltered in this time. Something of this can be seen in fundamentalist Islam today; the idea that a woman should not go out without a male escort, that she should be decently covered and (by our standards) overly modest. In a mixed group, men did all the talking. We cannot imagine this today.
- ✚ Women were under authority. It was understood by both men and women that the only woman who could possibly be on her own authority was a widow. Divorce was disgraceful; women were to be under the authority of their father (or other, older male relative) until they became submissive to the authority of their husband. If you wanted to know what a woman thought, you asked her husband.
- ✚ Because they were presumed to be flighty and unreliable, they were considered poor witnesses. Indeed, one of the arguments for the truth of the gospel is the fact that women were the first at the tomb. If you were constructing a fraud, you would've sent men to be the first at the tomb.

So you can see why the apostles were reluctant to take the women's word for it. Yet — they weren't ready to call them liars either. The situation was sufficiently extraordinary that John and Peter ran to the tomb.

The Curious Incident of the Grave Clothes

To understand what Peter and John saw, we must understand something of the funeral customs of the time. A body was laid in a tomb for a period of about a year. Before being put there, the body would be embalmed with spices and then wrapped in what amounted to an oversized Ace bandage. The head was then covered with a cloth and the body laid in the tomb. In about a year, the closest female relative would be given the rather gruesome chore scraping the remaining flesh off the bones and placing the bones in an ossuary. A body which been the tomb three days would, one supposes, have seen some decay (retarded by the embalming spices). But it would still be recognizable as a body — and as such be capable of being stolen.

It is likely enough that John and Peter would think that someone had stolen the body of Jesus from the tomb. The motive for such a theft on the part of anyone but the disciples is hard to understand — but the entire situation made no sense in the first place; that's why they went to investigate. Perhaps they thought that some member of the Pharisees decided to commit the ultimate sacrilege in denying Jesus a decent burial. One thing is certain: the tomb is empty.

We thus come to the curious incident of the grave clothes. Let's suppose you wanted to steal this body. Does the remaining evidence fit with this theory? Well, you would take the head cloth off in order to verify that you had the right body. You might even be a tidy little sort who would roll up the head cloth. (Some translations have the word "folded"; it actually means rolled.) So, if you are that neat, why do you unwrap the body? After all, it's a rather bloody mess. Wouldn't it make more sense to carry it wrapped? This is particularly true in Jewish society, where touching the body would make you unclean.

It is not unlikely that Peter and John saw the results and wondered precisely about these things. One thing is sure: the question of the resurrection was not settled for Peter by the evidence inside the tomb. John — who is clearly the better thinker of the two — probably reasoned it out this way.

Peter Sees

There is a curious contrast between the two Greek words used to describe how John and Peter looked into the tomb. In John's case, the word means to take a glancing look. In this case a different word is used; it means to look steadily something, and then discover what it is — and be satisfied with the result. John saw the obvious; Peter did not. But let's give Peter his credit; he took a long hard look at things. He went away puzzled and deeply unsatisfied.

It's a curious contradiction. The apostle who was capable of much more complex thought quickly comes to the right, simple answer. The man who likes his answers in black and white suddenly sees an entirely gray world. It's the beginning of his transition; he has hit the boundary layer.

Tell the Disciples and Peter

Mark 16:5-7 NASB Entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting at the right, wearing a white robe; and they were amazed. (6) And he *said to them, "Do not be amazed; you are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who has been crucified. He has risen; He is not here; behold,

here is the place where they laid Him. (7) "But go, tell His disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see Him, just as He told you.'"

Mary Magdalene

Much has been written of the fact that Christ's first appearance after the resurrection was to Mary Magdalene. It's not just that she's a woman; it's that historically she has been considered what used to be delicately called a "fallen woman." Many writers have seen in this action an instance of Christ caring for his primary mission: to seek and save the lost. It is as if he is saying that his care is for the meek and lowly — and that's where he'll start. It is a fascinating fact: the church starts with the common folk, the prostitutes, the poor and those of no influence whatsoever. Taken as a whole today, the church appears to the world as a place of pomp and hierarchy.

Peter

Peter, to put it simply, is ashamed of himself. He has betrayed his Lord. Just when he thought that Jesus' death put an end to the matter, he gets this report from the women at the tomb. A shame descends into dejection — and at the same time he is very puzzled as to what is going on.

Compassion for Peter

It is against that backdrop that we must pay attention to those two little words: "and Peter." Some writers have interpreted this to mean that, at the time, Christ did not consider Peter to be his disciple. In my opinion, this is a misinterpretation. What Jesus has done is a fine bit of compassion. He has taken the one disciple who has betrayed him, who is feeling the worst of all his followers, and inserted into his message of personal note just for him. Peter's need is the greatest amongst all the disciples; Christ therefore takes the time to insert a small but important message to Peter.

Compassion is sometimes shown best in the details. Our particular church congregation considers compassion something which is done by a large group of people for a large group of people. Christ here does the opposite; it is just with words he reaches out in compassion to the man who needs him most.

A Meeting Undescribed

You probably have not heard of this meeting; let me present the scriptural evidence.

Luke 24:32-35 NASB They said to one another, "Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?" (33) And they got up that very hour and returned to Jerusalem, and found gathered together the eleven and those who were with them, (34) saying, "The Lord has really risen and has appeared to Simon." (35) They *began* to relate their experiences on the road and how He was recognized by them in the breaking of the bread.

1 Corinthians 15:3-5 NASB (3) For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, (4) and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, (5) and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

Evidence

These are the only two passages in the Bible that document the personal meeting Peter had with Jesus on Easter Sunday. We know that it must have been on Easter Sunday, because Paul tells us that

he appeared to Peter (Cephas) and then to the twelve disciples as a whole. We know that it was Easter Sunday because of what the two disciples on the road had to say (that's the tail end of their story in the passage from Luke.) It might seem like a minor thing — and this writer was personally unaware of it until preparing this study — but I suspect it was very important to Peter. These two passages represent everything we know about that meeting. In other words, all we really know is that it happened. We don't know the content — even though much of Peter's thought appears in the Gospel of Mark.

Why a Separate Meeting?

We may make some reasonable speculation about this meeting. We know that it was not concerning Peter's restoration to full fellowship with Christ as head of the disciples; that takes place later. So if this meeting concerned that, we would not have the scene described later. Some suggestions have been made, largely based on the character of Christ himself.

- ✚ It may simply be just a case of special love and favor. Peter is a likable fellow; more than that, he is a natural leader of the disciples. Perhaps Christ wanted to affirm that both to Peter and the rest of the disciples.
- ✚ The most common speculation is that he wanted to comfort him in his time of distress. That is a very encouraging thought. How often the Christian assumed that because he has sinned he is cut off from the comfort of Christ. Not true! Here is the man who betrayed Christ; and yet Christ comes to him. Should not the sinner always apply to Christ for comfort?
- ✚ Perhaps it's just a case of timing. It may be that Christ wanted to relieve Peter's distress as soon as possible, and the best way to do this was in private. Managers quickly learn the rule, "praise in public, correct in private." Maybe that's just what Jesus was doing.
- ✚ It's also possible, as one writer put it, that what Christ had to say was "too sacred to record." Paul, in one instance, tells us of a revelation which he is not permitted to repeat. Perhaps Peter got the same thing.

About Christ

May we close this little lesson with some thoughts about Christ himself?

- ✚ Let's state the obvious: Christ cares about each and every one of us. It is his holy desire that not one should be lost. In dealing with Peter we may have an example of leaving the 99 to search for the one.
- ✚ Christ is quick to show compassion and give comfort. We often imagine Jesus as being like ourselves. It's hard it's us to be compassionate, and we like to take our time about it. If this applies to our compassion, think how long delayed our comfort is! It is not so with our Lord Jesus Christ. With that example it should not be so with us.
- ✚ We know that Christ came to seek and save the lost. We sometimes forget that even the experienced Christian can be counted in "the lost." We often tell the person who is not a Christian that it is impossible to be too great a sinner for Christ. Sometimes we need to tell ourselves the same thing.

Breakfast at the Beach - John 21

Going Fishing

John 21:1-11 NASB After these things Jesus manifested Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias, and He manifested *Himself* in this way. (2) Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the *sons* of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples were together. (3) Simon Peter *said to them, "I am going fishing." They *said to him, "We will also come with you." They went out and got into the boat; and that night they caught nothing. (4) But when the day was now breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. (5) So Jesus *said to them, "**Children, you do not have any fish, do you?**" They answered Him, "No." (6) And He said to them, "**Cast the net on the right-hand side of the boat and you will find a catch.**" So they cast, and then they were not able to haul it in because of the great number of fish. (7) Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved *said to Peter, "It is the Lord." So when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put his outer garment on (for he was stripped *for work*), and threw himself into the sea. (8) But the other disciples came in the little boat, for they were not far from the land, but about one hundred yards away, dragging the net *full* of fish. (9) So when they got out on the land, they *saw a charcoal fire *already* laid and fish placed on it, and bread. (10) Jesus *said to them, "**Bring some of the fish which you have now caught.**" (11) Simon Peter went up and drew the net to land, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not torn.

Doing What You Know

(You should note that Christ has already appeared to the disciples at least twice.) It may seem curious to the modern observer that the disciples, or at least some of them, went fishing. They are involved in the greatest event in history, something well beyond their own comprehension or experience, and their reaction to it is to go fishing. It may seem strange behavior. To them, however, it would not seem so strange; they were professional fisherman. In times of anxiety and stress, there is a comfort in going back to the routine and the familiar. When you don't know what to do, you do what you know.

It is also not strange that they caught nothing. Anyone who has ever been fishing understands that the fish are under no obligation to be caught. It is discouraging, but it is not unusual. As professional fisherman this would not be the first time they had experienced such a thing. Fishing all night is not unusual either; many fishermen around the world use some sort of light to attract the fish to the surface and then net them.

Wrong Side

To understand what is happening here, we need to review a little nautical terminology — and where it came from. Most readers will know the nautical terms "port" and "starboard". What's interesting to us in this context is the root of these particular words. Starboard is a contraction of the phrase, "steering board." This dates to the days before the invention of the rudder — something which came along the late medieval time. Until you had a ship whose stern stuck out of the water, it made no sense to put a hole in the bottom of the boat for the steering board. The steering board was kept on the right-hand side of the ship (because most people were right-handed) and muscled around to steer the ship. Thus, the right-hand side of the ship was known as the steering board side, later contracted to

starboard. The other side of the ship, the left side, was called the port side because that was the side you laid alongside the port. That way you didn't damage your steering board.

What does all this mean to us? It means that the steering board would be on the right-hand side of the ship and you would cast your nets on the left-hand side of the ship. You have to be a pretty frustrated fisherman, then, to take the advice of some guy on the shore telling you to put your net on the right-hand side. It's likely you will foul your steering board — a nasty mess. But it's also possible that the man on the shore can see something you can't — so it might be worth a try.

Every now and then you get a result which is unexpected. It tends to get your attention. So when you've been fishing all night and you've caught nothing, and then you get a boatload of fish by doing something which seems wrong, you pay attention. It's not exactly a miracle; technically, it's a providence. It's a very convincing providence. Peter catches on immediately. If you will recall, every time Peter gets in a boat with Jesus things do not go according to plan. He recognizes the results immediately.

Peter's Reaction

Peter recognizes Jesus by the results. It's an important point for us today. Some of us have the vague idea that we would recognize Jesus if he appeared to us in miraculous form, but otherwise he is completely unrecognizable. That's because we no longer teach the concept of providence. Have you ever had one of those incidents in your life where everything just came together? It wasn't exactly miraculous, but you could see the hand of God working behind the scenes? That's providence. Quite literally, it is God providing for you (hence the name, providence.) Peter sees it; do you?

It's interesting to note that Peter stops to put on his outer garment. We can assume the other disciples would've left it in the boat; perhaps Peter wanted Christ to know that he had all of Peter, missing nothing. Partial commitment does not become the Christian.

He then swims to shore. It is a remarkable display of his enthusiasm; he's only 100 yards offshore, and it won't take that long to row the boat there. But Peter is a man of action, whose motto seems to be, "direct action whenever possible." The contrast with John is instructive. John is more contemplative by nature, and is content for the boat to take him to Christ. It seems that the reaction depends upon the disciple. Here is an instance where it is important to remember the saying, "Judge not."

One final point: note that Peter helps haul the net in from the shore. The true disciple of Christ is willing to do the work, no matter how hot and sweaty it is.

Breakfast

John 21:12-19 NASB Jesus *said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples ventured to question Him, "Who are You?" knowing that it was the Lord. (13) Jesus *came and *took the bread and *gave it to them, and the fish likewise. (14) This is now the third time that Jesus was manifested to the disciples, after He was raised from the dead. (15) So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus *said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?" He *said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He *said to him, "Tend My

lambs." (16) He *said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" He *said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He *said to him, "Shepherd My sheep." (17) He *said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus *said to him, "Tend My sheep. (18) "Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go." (19) Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He *said to him, "Follow Me!"

Invitation

Please note the phrase, "None of the disciples ventured to question Him." It's a modest way of phrasing the fact that none of the disciples at this point had the guts to ask, "Are you really Jesus?" This is, by all accounts, the third time the disciples have seen him in a group. At this point, they know what they're dealing with. They just don't know what to do with it.

We may make a culinary note at this point: Jesus brought the bread. Jesus cooked the fish that they caught. Breakfast, it seems, is a cooperative effort between the disciples and Christ. This may seem a minor point to you, but it actually is quite important. Many Christians have the idea that everything depends upon their efforts. If they can't see a way to get it done, then it can't be done. Other Christians have the idea that all we need to do is pray and things will happen; we don't need to really do anything. The truth is in the middle. Like breakfast, Christian endeavors are a cooperative effort between Christ and the disciples. The key is to figure out what he wants us to do and what we should leave to him.

There is a very deep theological point here, also. Christ eats breakfast with them after the resurrection. It is common these days to hear the Christ had some sort of spiritual body (think ghostly). One of the reasons he eats with the disciples is to show them that he is fully human. The importance of this point has been appreciated since the early days of the church — because the heretics who are fond of that spiritual body have been with us since the early days of the church.

A Note on the Greek

The reader will pardon this diversion into the Greek language. The passage in question is almost impossible to translate correctly into English. The reason for this is somewhat unexpected. Normally, the English language has many more words for a similar concept than does the Greek language. In this instance, however, Greek has for words which are correctly translated into the English word, "love."

- ✚ *Storge*, which means the kind of love you would have within a family.
- ✚ *Eros*, from which we get our word "erotic", means sexual love.
- ✚ *Phileo*, which is often translated "brotherly love", is the word used here in all three instances by Peter. It generally implies an affection which comes from the heart but not the head.
- ✚ *Agape*, which is used by Christ in the first two instances, means a love which comes from the will. Put shortly, it is love which stems from the head more than the heart.

You can easily see how this changes our understanding of the dialogue. Christ uses the higher and stronger word in his first two questions; Peter replies with the weaker one. On the third try, Christ uses Peter's word. The implication is that Christ is willing to accept what Peter offers; the emotional side

of love. It also implies that what Christ desires is more than that. The matter is at once simple and powerful: love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind and all your strength. You may not be capable of doing all that, certainly not all the time. But Christ accepts best effort.

Restoring Peter

May I point out one simple thing? Notice that Jesus waited until after breakfast to have this conversation. It is an example of our Lord's grace. Have you ever had to go to someone and apologize — and dreaded the meeting beforehand? You understand the emotions that Peter must have felt. He probably expected to be chewed out royally, and he was not looking forward to it. He probably suspected that he was going to be kicked out of the group of disciples. Jesus counters that feeling by including Peter in the meal. In the culture of that time, if you were invited to eat with someone it was a sign that you were included in their group. If you eat my home, you must be welcome in my home. By doing this, Christ made Peter feel welcome with him.

There is a simple, classic point made about this passage by virtually every commentator. Peter denied Christ three times; Christ restored Peter three times. At the very least we may conclude that the grace of Christ is all sufficient. More than that, we may also conclude that Christ will take us back no matter how many times we have offended. For those of us who are experienced sinners, this is very good news indeed.

Each time that Jesus speaks to Peter here he gives him the same task: take care of my sheep. In so doing he confirms Peter as the head of the disciples. More than that, however, he tells the rest of us how much he cares for us. There are many things that Peter is going to have to do, as we shall see. But Christ has him focus on the one most important thing: take care my sheep. Winston Churchill tells us that when British generals first heard the American generals use the phrase, "overall strategic objective," they laughed. But then he says, "later on, its wisdom became apparent." It helps to know what your main objective is — and always to keep it in focus.

Warning

Almost casually, Jesus then tells Peter how he is going to die. It is a curious thing about Christianity: the assumption is that the Christian will suffer. The greater the service to Christ, the greater the suffering. This is, as the physicists put it, "intuitively obvious to the casual observer." How can this be? The world hates Christ. The Prince of this world is Satan; hate is his greatest weapon; Christ is his great enemy. It is no great logical leap, therefore, to see that Satan will hate those who love the way Christ loves. Peter's service will be great; likewise his suffering.

What about Him?

John 21:20-25 NASB Peter, turning around, *saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; the one who also had leaned back on His bosom at the supper and said, "Lord, who is the one who betrays You?" (21) So Peter seeing him *said to Jesus, "Lord, and what about this man?" (22) Jesus *said to him, "If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!" (23) Therefore this saying went out among the brethren that that disciple would not die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but only, "If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you?" (24) This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and wrote

these things, and we know that his testimony is true. (25) And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they *were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself *would not contain the books that *would be written.

Peter Changed

The change in Peter is rather breathtaking. From the man who was worried about his status he has gone back to being Peter the bold. The first thing he does is ask the question which is none of his business. That takes guts.

It also shows us the close union of Peter and John. As far as we know, Peter didn't ask anything about any other disciple. As we shall see, the two of them are inseparable in the early days of the church. It's an unusual pairing, perhaps. For if Peter is the man of action then John is the man thought. It is as if Christ were saying to us through this great friendship, "you need both action and mind." This is true for each individual Christian; it is even truer for the church as a whole. Paul makes this point several times when he describes the church as a body. Peter alone cannot perform the tasks assigned; he needs the help of the other disciples. No matter how great you are in the church, you are still part of the body.

Why Did He Ask?

Remember, please, the last thing before he asked was the statement by Christ about how much he was going to suffer. Peter's question relates to that suffering. In effect, he's asking how much John is going to suffer. Why would he do that?

- ✚ Some writers feel that Peter is deflecting the pain of the suffering which is coming. It's a rather psychological concept.
- ✚ In another sense, Peter is sharing the pain. He knows he's going to suffer; it always feels better to know you're not suffering alone. That's just how human beings are built.
- ✚ It's also possible that he's just curious. John is, after all, his best friend.

The apostle John records the answer simply as, "none of your business." God never told Job why he was suffering. Often enough, suffering comes without explanation. If our own suffering comes that way, how much more unexplained is the suffering of others. One of the reasons we are discouraged from judging others is that we have the tendency to see in their suffering some unjudged sin. For this reason, God seldom if ever tells you what somebody else is going to suffer. It's a form of, "lead us not into temptation." God tells us only our own story and that day by day.

The reason John records this in his gospel is rather simple: Christ's answer was misunderstood by some in the early church to mean that John would live until Christ returned. That's not what Christ said, as John points out.

Restoration of the Believer

We may close this lesson with a few points to remember:

- ✚ As often as you fail, Christ is there to restore you.
- ✚ You may not see it that way. You may think that there is a limit to love, because your love is limited. But remember that his love is greater than your love. Count on that.
- ✚ Christ's love for you does not depend on anyone else. It doesn't matter what your pastor thinks or your wife says; Christ's love is eternal.

Remember the Prodigal Son; his father *ran* to greet him and bring him home.

First Sermon – Acts 2:14-40

Old and New

The Modern Sermon

The contrast between the modern sermon and those of the apostles is often startling. We may note three things about the modern sermon which are completely different:

- ✦ The basic authority cited in the modern sermon is psychology. No preacher today would begin a sermon without having notes from various magazines dealing with popular psychology. Once his thoughts were outlined then, and only then, would he look into the Bible for quotations which support his view.
- ✦ Style is much more important than substance. This is simply a reflection of our society; if you have something to say, it must be said in an entertaining way. We won't listen to anything else.
- ✦ Today's sermons are inoffensive to the point of being meek. The thought that someone might be offended is anathema.

Contrast: the Ancient Sermon

Let's take a look at the very first sermon to see the contrast:

Acts 2:14-40 NASB But Peter, taking his stand with the eleven, raised his voice and declared to them: "Men of Judea and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and give heed to my words. (15) "For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is *only* the third hour of the day; (16) but this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel: (17) 'AND IT SHALL BE IN THE LAST DAYS,' God says, 'THAT I WILL POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT ON ALL MANKIND; AND YOUR SONS AND YOUR DAUGHTERS SHALL PROPHECY, AND YOUR YOUNG MEN SHALL SEE VISIONS, AND YOUR OLD MEN SHALL DREAM DREAMS; (18) EVEN ON MY BONDSLAVES, BOTH MEN AND WOMEN, I WILL IN THOSE DAYS POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT And they shall prophesy. (19) 'AND I WILL GRANT WONDERS IN THE SKY ABOVE AND SIGNS ON THE EARTH BELOW, BLOOD, AND FIRE, AND VAPOR OF SMOKE. (20) 'THE SUN WILL BE TURNED INTO DARKNESS AND THE MOON INTO BLOOD, BEFORE THE GREAT AND GLORIOUS DAY OF THE LORD SHALL COME. (21) 'AND IT SHALL BE THAT EVERYONE WHO CALLS ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED.' (22) "Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know-- (23) this *Man*, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put *Him* to death. (24) "But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power. (25) "For David says of Him, 'I SAW THE LORD ALWAYS IN MY PRESENCE; FOR HE IS AT MY RIGHT HAND, SO THAT I WILL NOT BE SHAKEN. (26) 'THEREFORE MY HEART WAS GLAD AND MY TONGUE EXULTED; MOREOVER MY FLESH ALSO WILL LIVE IN HOPE; (27) BECAUSE YOU WILL NOT ABANDON MY SOUL TO HADES, NOR ALLOW YOUR HOLY ONE TO UNDERGO DECAY. (28) 'YOU HAVE MADE KNOWN TO ME THE WAYS OF LIFE; YOU WILL MAKE ME FULL OF GLADNESS WITH YOUR PRESENCE.' (29) "Brethren, I may confidently say to you regarding the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. (30) "And so, because he was a

prophet and knew that GOD HAD SWORN TO HIM WITH AN OATH TO SEAT *one* OF HIS DESCENDANTS ON HIS THRONE, (31) he looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that HE WAS NEITHER ABANDONED TO HADES, NOR DID His flesh SUFFER DECAY. (32) "This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses. (33) "Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear. (34) "For it was not David who ascended into heaven, but he himself says: "THE LORD SAID TO MY LORD, "SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND, (35) UNTIL I MAKE YOUR ENEMIES A FOOTSTOOL FOR YOUR FEET." (36) "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ--this Jesus whom you crucified." (37) Now when they heard *this*, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" (38) Peter *said* to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (39) "For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself." (40) And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation!"

The ancient, by contrast

The first and major contrast is that Peter relies upon the Scriptures completely. To be specific:

- ✚ Peter considers that prophecy is to be used as a part of his persuasion, not as something so obscure as to be irrelevant.
- ✚ The concepts of sin and right and wrong, as defined in the Scriptures, are clearly assumed in his message.
- ✚ The nature of the character of God is presumed to be revealed, and in this instance known to his audience. Paul, by comparison, often has to explain it.

Peter no doubt would have appreciated the advantages of modern psychology somehow. But not having such things, he had to make do with the classic paradigm of antiquity. First, you establish the facts. Second, you assist your audience in drawing the proper implications from those facts. Third you exhort them to action in accordance with those implications. Peter was not afraid to introduce Christ as the "rock of offense" or the "stone of stumbling."

Outline

We will take a look at this in more detail. I propose to begin with prophecy; then discuss death, burial and resurrection — and what you should do about it.

Prophecy

Before we get too much into this, would you notice Peter's instruction to his hearers: "listen carefully." Peter makes the assumption that he can make a detailed, logical argument to his listeners which they will follow. Outside of the college classroom today it is not at all certain that this is still true.

Prophecy of the Last Days

Peter is not afraid to use prophecy quite boldly. In particular the passage he opens with (from Joel) concerns itself with both the first and second advents of our Lord. There are three points from this prophecy we may see these profitably:

- ✚ The first is the patience of God. This prophecy is over 400 years old at the time Peter used it. Apparently God intends prophecy to extend over a great period of time. While this should give pause to those who participate in "This Week in Bible Prophecy", it should tell the rest of us that we really don't know the times and days of fulfillment. God is patient, not dead.
- ✚ The second is God's eternal purpose. From the very beginning the redemption of man is planned. Prophecy reflects this.
- ✚ This particular prophecy also shows to us the unity of God and Christ. By applying this prophecy to Jesus of Nazareth as its fulfillment, we see such unity.

Prophecy by David

David's prophecy, as used here, tells us two things that David knew 1000 years before the coming of Jesus:

- ✚ David knew of the resurrection. This, of course, implies that he knew that the Messiah was going to die first. The implications of this concerning God's eternal purpose are clear.
- ✚ David also knew of the Lordship of Christ. How could the son of David be superior to David? Only if he were God! Therefore the Christ must be God – but he must also die. Therefore the Christ must also be man.

These two points are essential to the Christian faith — and are outlined by David 1000 years before Christ.

The Uses of Prophecy

The modern believer often has little use for prophecy except as an exercise in intellectual chewing gum. But prophecy does have its proper use:

- ✚ For the unbeliever prophecy exists to help the Holy Spirit convict the world of sin and of judgment. It is a plain fact of prophecy that someday the judgment will come, and it will apply to all. We should not be afraid to state that fact.
- ✚ For the believer, the existence of prophecy is a source of strength and encouragement. To know that prophecy has been fulfilled tells you that the documents you are using are indeed inspired by God. They are therefore also a source of instruction for the believer.

Death, Burial and Resurrection

Death

Why does Peter talk about the death of Christ? Because it is essential to the faith – that's why. It is essential for at least these three reasons:

- ✚ By his death Christ pays the price of atonement for our sins. This gives us the measure of how precious our celebration is, and also the measure of great is the love of God.
- ✚ It is not just atonement. God intended to pay the price for the sins — but he also intends that we be reconciled to him. It is not just payment but a return to fellowship with God that he desires.
- ✚ The death of Christ is the ultimate example of sacrifice, which should therefore be the highest point of our imitation of Christ. This may not occur to you or to me, but there is one point we can imitate on a regular basis. Note that our Lord not only forgave those who crucified him (some of whom became Christians a few weeks later), but he also asked God the Father to forgive them as well. You may forgive; but do you ask others to forgive?

Burial

Why is burial so important? So that you'll know that Jesus was dead. You know this because the apostles knew this; look at their reactions.

So why is it so important that you know that Jesus was dead? Because it's a physical death we have a physical resurrection. The tomb was empty. The physical body was gone. The disciples knew the difference; they knew they were not talking to the ghost of Jesus.

If Christ has a physical resurrection, then his promise that we too shall have the physical resurrection makes sense. Please do not be deceived by the modern tendency to "spiritualize" this. The sense of the Scripture, the teaching of the church for almost 2000 years, is the same: the physical resurrection of the dead. Without it, Christianity makes little sense.

Resurrection

Let's be clear about that: if there is no physical resurrection of Jesus Christ, then all true Christians are fools — or as Paul put it for the King James, "we are of all men most miserable." Those who treat the resurrection body as if it were nothing but a glorified ghost have missed the point entirely. We are explicitly told that Christ is the author and sustainer of the universe. That author, that sustainer says that we will rise from the grave in physical form. You need to trust that, or you don't. You can't explain it.

When does this happen? At our Lord's return.

Interestingly, the fact that Christ has a physical body implies that at some point he must go away. He can't just fade in and out like a ghost. The physical body implies the Ascension. As Christ told us, he had to go away so that the Holy Spirit might come. So I hope you see that his departure in the physical body was a necessary prerequisite to the coming of the Holy Spirit and the establishment of the church.

This Perverse Generation

So, what do I want you to do about it? The same thing Peter wanted: that you save yourselves from "this perverse generation." I wonder what Peter would've thought of our generation; perhaps we give his generation the relative excuse of being even more perverse (and perverted). How do we do this?

- ✚ Recognize the times. Look at the world around you: ask yourself, is this a time where virtue reigns? Or is it not a time when Satan does? If so, should we not realize what we're living in? Do we cooperate with it or do we defy it?
- ✚ Make the choice. Recognize that the world is going to pressure you to live like everybody else, to get along and go along. That pressure is going to come to you in the form of not making a decision. But the old saying goes, "not to decide is to decide." Decide.

The Lame Man - Acts 3:1-26

Peter and John

Acts 3:1-10 NASB Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the ninth *hour*, the hour of prayer. (2) And a man who had been lame from his mother's womb was being carried along, whom they used to set down every day at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, in order to beg alms of those who were entering the temple. (3) When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he *began* asking to receive alms. (4) But Peter, along with John, fixed his gaze on him and said, "Look at us!" (5) And he *began* to give them his attention, expecting to receive something from them. (6) But Peter said, "I do not possess silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene--walk!" (7) And seizing him by the right hand, he raised him up; and immediately his feet and his ankles were strengthened. (8) With a leap he stood upright and *began* to walk; and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. (9) And all the people saw him walking and praising God; (10) and they were taking note of him as being the one who used to sit at the Beautiful Gate of the temple to *beg* alms, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

Life of the Beggar

It is difficult for most of us to understand the life of the common beggar. We are accustomed to seeing people by the roadside with the cardboard sign, but most of us have never been one. As difficult as this must be today, think how difficult it was before there was any form of public assistance. The beggar of this day would need to pay people to take him to the Temple area. They would leave him there until evening. He could collect coins, but it's possible he would be robbed as well.

The location chosen — at the entrance to the Temple — was designed to expose him to all of the pious, good people of the time. The assumption was that if you're going to the Temple you were a godly person. A godly person would not neglect the poor, as this was in accordance with the Commandments.

Your author has some experience in this. I once worked in downtown San Francisco for over two years at a stretch. During that time I was exposed to one particular beggar who stood between my subway station in my office. At first I ignored him. "I can't solve world hunger." But God reminded me that he had not asked me to solve world hunger; he asked me to feed one beggar. Gift certificates to a local fast food place became routine. We may wonder with each other whether or not the welfare state has really served to increase the welfare of those so needy.

Peter

It's worth noting that Peter and John are on their way to the Temple at the hour of prayer. We are accustomed to the idea that you can pray anywhere; your location makes no difference. The Jew of this time would have disagreed. He would tell you that prayer at the Temple was most effective. It is, after all, the place where God had put his Name. The devout Jew would prefer to pray at the Temple over any other spot on Earth. We might not feel the same way, but we may at least note that Peter and John were men of prayer. Apparently, this was the start of their day.

The dialogue with the beggar contains an interesting point. You will notice that Peter says, "Look at us!" It has been my experience that those doing the begging try not to make eye contact with anyone, apparently because it is intimidating. The beggar is not there to intimidate you, but to extract some money from you. If you think you're being robbed, by intimidation, the beggar fails. But Peter, concerned with the human being as a disciple of Christ should be, tells the man to look at him. He wants to make eye contact for the cause of Christ. He could drop money in his bag without even looking at the man. In short, Peter cares about the human being.

It's a point worth noting. I have often been told that the man with the cardboard sign is not worthy to receive anything. Have you ever heard someone say that they are all frauds? But let's consider the question directly: just exactly who is worthy of my charitable giving? We feel pretty comfortable with large organizations, but human beings rather frighten us. More than that, we feel that we ought to judge them somehow. We want to make sure that we're giving our money to someone who is unfortunate, not fraudulent. But may I ask you to consider these points:

- ✚ First, they are not defrauding you. You give at the command of Christ; they are therefore defrauding him. Should you not therefore leave judgment to him? He will reward you for the giving.
- ✚ Second, is there anyone worthy of your charity? It implies a judgment for which you do not have the facts. If you did have the facts, you'd complain to Christ of the burden of making the judgment.

Silver and Gold

A story is told of Thomas Aquinas. It apparently is based in fact, though I have seen several different versions of it. It seems that Aquinas was invited to Rome by the Pope. The Pope assigned a priest to show Aquinas around the city of Rome, in particular emphasizing the beauty and magnificence of the buildings of the church. At the end of the tour the priest remarked something like, "well, at least the church no longer has to say silver and gold have I none." Aquinas replied, "Neither can she say, rise up and walk."

It is one of the great paradoxes of the church: the power of poverty. The church which has plenty of money soon finds a place to put it. That church, like the Laodicean church of the book of Revelation, quickly becomes lukewarm and content. The church that is lean and hungry appears to be weaker. Appearances can be deceiving.

So how do you tell the difference? My son gave me the answer in the distinction between synthetic and natural religion. It's fairly simple:

- ✚ Synthetic religion concerns itself with the man in the pew. That man is praised; the activities of the church concern that man; and that man is expected to produce significant monetary contributions.
- ✚ Natural religion concerns itself with God. It is God who is praised; the activities of the church are at God's command – and God is expected to provide.

Synthetic religion has the merit of being logical and self-serving. Natural religion is opaque.

Why Does This Surprise You?

Acts 3:11-16 NASB While he was clinging to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them at the so-called portico of Solomon, full of amazement. (12) But when Peter saw *this*, he replied

to the people, "Men of Israel, why are you amazed at this, or why do you gaze at us, as if by our own power or piety we had made him walk? (13) "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His servant Jesus, *the one* whom you delivered and disowned in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release Him. (14) "But you disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, (15) but put to death the Prince of life, *the one* whom God raised from the dead, *a fact* to which we are witnesses. (16) "And on the basis of faith in His name, *it is* the name of Jesus which has strengthened this man whom you see and know; and the faith which *comes* through Him has given him this perfect health in the presence of you all.

(The phrase "so-called portico of Solomon" seems somewhat derogatory; the name of the place was in fact the portico of Solomon. It was not the original one, though, as the original Temple had long since been destroyed.)

Why Are You Amazed?

So much of what we do depends upon the confidence we have. Think about this: you normally drive an automobile at speeds in excess of 60 miles an hour. Two tons of steel and plastic at that speed are quite deadly; yet you have such confidence in your driving that you think very little of this. If we could transplant Peter and John to our own day, then put them in the backseat, I suspect that they would have a very different reaction. They would very quickly call upon you to cease this highly dangerous activity.

Peter is now the one with confident faith; it did not surprise him in the least that God would allow him to heal a man was born lame. He is in fact somewhat puzzled why everyone else thinks this is extraordinary. This is a very common blindness in human beings. Any writer can tell you that one of the most difficult things to do is to edit your own work. The reason is simple; as you read what you've written your brain fills in all the parts that are missing and corrects all the parts that are misspelled. You simply don't notice what's wrong because you know what the right answer is. This simple fact is the main cause for the employment of editors. This might explain why Peter is surprised at their surprise.

Peter is a complete brick, of course. His ability to introspect is rather limited. I suspect that John perhaps enlightened Peter a little later on; John, after all, is the thinker of the bunch.

What You Already Know

Peter's purpose in speaking is not just to explain the miracle which has occurred. His purpose is to introduce them to a correct knowledge of Jesus, the Christ. So it is not surprising that he starts with something that they already know, and know correctly. That something is the nature and character of God. He does this by reminding them of the unique history of the Jews. He specifically refers them to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The statement is important. Peter is not proclaiming some minor deity.

He then refers them to the history of Jesus of Nazareth, with which most of them would be quite familiar. It has been a little over seven weeks since the crucifixion. To this history now adds the one fact which makes all the difference: the resurrection.

This, then, is his explanation. It is a small and trivial thing for a man to be given his sight when the power behind that gift is the risen Lord.

The Name

We cannot stress this sufficiently: Peter places the source of power as the name of Jesus. That sounds funny to modern Christians; it's as if there's something magic about the word "Jesus" that could never be said about "Fred". But to the Jew of this time it makes perfect sense; the Temple, after all, is the place where God has put his name. It is by the power of the name of God that the Jews are who they are. Even to this day we often end our prayers with the phrase, "in the name of Jesus." It seems a little bit of a formality to us, but to the early Christian it was power itself. Older Christians will recall a time when using the name of Jesus as an obscenity was considered highly offensive. That time is past; however, one might argue that it should not be so.

What Peter does not say here is that he, Peter, is given any authority. It is a very key and consistent point about the apostles of the early church that they clearly followed Christ's principle on this. Christ said that "if I be lifted up" that the world would be drawn to him. Peter explicitly proclaims that the power is in Christ — and implicitly tells us that it is not in the first Pope. There is a lesson for the modern evangelical Christian in this too. We are often told that the secret to church growth is for us to invite other people to come to church. The theory is they will see how good and pleasant things are here and wish to join. The early church saw it quite differently. For one thing, persecution was a commonplace event in the early church. So it wasn't a pleasant place; it was a place that lifted up the name of Jesus. It may seem curious to us, but the power of God is in that name. It is that power on which the early church relied.

I cannot forbear to add a personal story here. I think it exemplifies the difference in the attitude fairly well. I was having a conversation with a member of the staff at my church. I was proposing some course of action which I thought would be beneficial to the body of Christ. The staff member asked me, "Just what does this do for the greater glory of Eastside?" My reply was simple: "What does it do for the glory of God?" If you want the right answers, you must first ask the right questions.

Prophecy

Acts 3:17-26 NASB "And now, brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, just as your rulers did also. (18) "But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. (19) "Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; (20) and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, (21) whom heaven must receive until *the* period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time. (22) "Moses said, 'THE LORD GOD WILL RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE ME FROM YOUR BRETHREN; TO HIM YOU SHALL GIVE HEED to everything He says to you. (23) 'And it will be that every soul that does not heed that prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people.' (24) "And likewise, all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and *his* successors onward, also announced these days. (25) "It is you who are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, 'AND IN YOUR SEED ALL THE

FAMILIES OF THE EARTH SHALL BE BLESSED.' (26) "For you first, God raised up His Servant and sent Him to bless you by turning every one *of you* from your wicked ways."

Fulfilled in Christ

The early church used prophecy in a rather different way than we do. As far as I can tell, there is no sense of the idea that the Jews should have clearly understood what was happening in Christ was crucified. Prophecy, it seems, is a set of clues to what will happen – not a list of stocks in which to invest. What Peter is doing here is using the prophecy that his listeners were familiar with, explaining it to them as being fulfilled in Christ. In other words, he's doing what Agatha Christie used to do: telling you the answer in the last chapter. The correct reaction is not, "I should have known that." The correct reaction is, "Oh, that's what that means!"

The particularly difficult point for the average Jew of this time would be the suffering through which Christ went. There are passages in the Old Testament which relate to the first coming of Christ, and others which relate to the second coming. By pointing out those which refer to the first coming, Peter is revealing to his audience just what God was trying to tell them. The Christ was going to suffer. This was fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth.

Therefore you should conclude that Christ has come, and you need to do something about it. Notice that the "something" hasn't really changed since the Old Testament. Peter calls upon them to repent and return, so that God might wipe out their sins and send to them "times of refreshing." God is very consistent about his policy towards sinners. From the earliest days he desires their repentance. Following that he wants them to change their ways and return to him. It's really very simple.

Prophetic Warning

Peter then follows this with a warning. Moses told the people of Israel but sometimes God would raise up another prophet like Moses. The warning that Moses gave was simply this: if you don't listen to that prophet, you will be in big trouble. If you do, things will go well. If you don't, you will be utterly destroyed. The history of the Jews, starting in A.D. 70, bears this out quite nicely.

Peter also relates the fact that Christ will return. Of course, the obvious question is this: "When?" Peter then uses a phrase which explains everything and nothing at the same time: "period of restoration of all things." It's a frustrating thing; it means that when God is done doing whatever it is that he's going to do before Christ returns, then we can expect Christ to return. Those of you who have calculated the exact date of his return — well, good luck with that.

Blessing Prophesied

Having given his warning, Peter turns to the good news. He tells the Jews quite bluntly that they are the first to receive this good news because of the covenant God made with Abraham. Out of Abraham's descendents the entire world would be blessed; that blessing is the coming of Jesus, the Christ. That blessing is the gift of salvation, freely given at the Cross. That blessing came to the Jews first. It is a sad but true fact that the Jews, in general, rejected that good news. As a result, that good news went out to the Gentiles – just as God planned.

There is much we can say about this; for example, some hold that all of the Jews in the world have to be converted to Christianity before Christ can return. An analysis of prophecy concerning the Jews after the time of Christ is well beyond the scope of this small and limited lesson. That does not mean, however, that God is done with the Jews and there is no such prophecy. Clearly, God has a special relationship with the Jews. Points beyond that I must leave to the reader.

One thing, however, is abundantly clear: Christ came to seek and save the lost. God sent him to us to be a blessing by turning each and all of us from our wicked ways, causing us to repent and return to the righteous ways of God. For this alone the name of Jesus should be held high in our hearts. The day is coming when the glory of Christ will be revealed. I do not know the day or hour that will happen; but happen it will. Whatever hour he comes, we must be ready. If you get nothing from this lesson but the phrase, "repent and return," you will have grasped the most important message.

Conflict and Authority - Acts 4:1-31

Church and State: The Theory

We must begin with the simple review of the conflict between church and state, which is with us yet.

Normal Times

A complete discussion of the relationship between church and state is well beyond the scope of a single lesson. We may, however, make three simple observations which govern the conduct of the Christian citizen during normal times.

- ✚ The first is the recognition that the Christian citizen owes a duty to the state. The Christian is to "render unto Caesar."⁸ It is our responsibility to determine what we owe to the government, and then to deliver it. Both knowing and delivering are sometimes difficult.
- ✚ We are also to recognize the authority of the state, particularly in matters which concern keeping the order of civilization.⁹ Paying taxes, obedience to the police authorities and the other duties of a good citizen are the normal concern of the Christian.
- ✚ The Christian should recognize that belonging to the state or nation which is well governed is something for which we should be at least pleased, and perhaps even take some pride therein.¹⁰

Remember that when the New Testament was written the Christians were an extremely small minority. They had virtually no influence over the government; therefore, the instructions given were for those who had no choice in their government.

Oppression

Of course, it sometimes happens that the times are not normal. The early Christians faced a good deal of oppression, mostly from the Jews. Occasionally the local magistrate would take a hand in this — sometimes stopping it, sometimes enforcing it. It is important for the Christian to know the difference between a government which is doing something we don't like and a government which is oppressing us. How can we tell the difference?

- ✚ The first principle is that of the Magna Carta: the King is not above the law. If the governing authorities ignore their own laws to oppress the church, the Christian must react as the Scripture commands. As we shall see, this does not necessarily mean rebellion.
- ✚ If the state thinks itself supreme in all matters of moral judgment ("if it's legal, it's moral") then the conflict between church and state is mortal. If the church accepts the state's moral authority, the church is cut off from the vine of Christ.
- ✚ Particularly in the second case, the servant of Christ will certainly suffer. This carries with it the corollary that some Christians will not have the courage to suffer.

God's Weakness

The question might well ask: "Just why is it that God wants me to suffer for this?" There are at least two reasons:

⁸ Matthew 22:16-21

⁹ Romans 13:1-7

¹⁰ See Acts 22:27-28

- ✦ First, there is the principle that God's strength is perfected in weakness.¹¹ We can easily see how the strong prevail; when we see the weak prevail, we are curious.
- ✦ Second, the Christian witness is certified by suffering. If you want to know if someone is sincere in his beliefs, see how much he will suffer for them.

Permit me a great example. Several years ago the president of our local University decided to remove all Christian influence from the campus. He abolished all Christian organizations and forbade any Christian meetings on campus. Christ was left with precisely one witness: Curly. He didn't look like much. He weighed about 90 pounds; he had boils all over his body; he was recovering from blindness in his right eye where the surgeons had to drill into his skull to get at a tumor; he had epilepsy; he had had several strokes. Each day his friends would push him to a prominent part of the campus. Sitting in his wheelchair, unable to move, he would cry out to all who passed by, "Jesus loves you." The president of the University could not find a police officer with enough macho to arrest him for doing that. Ultimately the Christian organizations were allowed back in, but in the meanwhile Curly was Christ's witness.

By What Power

Acts 4:1-22 NASB As they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple *guard* and the Sadducees came up to them, (2) being greatly disturbed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. (3) And they laid hands on them and put them in jail until the next day, for it was already evening. (4) But many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand. (5) On the next day, their rulers and elders and scribes were gathered together in Jerusalem; (6) and Annas the high priest *was there*, and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of high-priestly descent. (7) When they had placed them in the center, they *began to* inquire, "By what power, or in what name, have you done this?" (8) Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers and elders of the people, (9) if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, (10) let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead--by this *name* this man stands here before you in good health. (11) "He is the **STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED** by you, **THE BUILDERS**, *but WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER* *stone*. (12) "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved." (13) Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed, and *began to* recognize them as having been with Jesus. (14) And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they had nothing to say in reply. (15) But when they had ordered them to leave the Council, they *began to* confer with one another, (16) saying, "What shall we do with these men? For the fact that a noteworthy miracle has taken place through them is apparent to all who live in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. (17) "But so that it will not spread any further among the people, let us warn them to speak no longer to any man in this name." (18) And when they had summoned them, they commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. (19) But Peter and John answered and said to them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; (20) for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard." (21) When they had threatened them further, they let them go (finding no basis on

¹¹ Second Corinthians 12:8-10

which to punish them) on account of the people, because they were all glorifying God for what had happened; (22) for the man was more than forty years old on whom this miracle of healing had been performed.

Key Question

You can see the problems the authorities have here. It is plain to all that what Peter has done is an act of kindness and charity towards a man who is an example of long, painful suffering. If you are going to be in conflict with authority, the starting point for the Christian is that our actions should be those of Christ. As strange as it sounds, there are communities in our nation which make it a crime to feed the poor. This is based on some distorted theory that if we don't feed them they will go away. If you're going to suffer, let it be for doing something good.

But that's not sufficient. You need to connect that good deed with the name of Christ. It is not just that I am feeding the poor, you see, is that I am feeding the poor at the command of Jesus Christ. It's not just some bright idea that I came up with. This lets the authorities know that they are not dealing with some fuzzy brained do-gooder, but a servant to Jesus Christ. The conflict is not between us and authority, but between Christ and authority.

This also determines our defense. We are not defending ourselves. It is not our purpose to tell the authorities how righteous we are, or how hungry the poor are. It is our purpose to tell them about Jesus Christ. In the process, we will tell a lot of other people too. We need always to act so that everyone understands that the conflict is not between us and the authorities, but between Christ and the authorities.

The Message

This may cause a bit of grief to some. Our message is not that we are doing good deeds, though that is exactly what we are doing. Nor is our message that we are wonderful people and should be praised for doing our good deeds. Our message is Jesus Christ. He is the cause of our good deeds, and if we appear to be wonderful people it is the reflection of his glory that the world sees.

Reaction of the Authorities

The first concern of all secular authorities is this: that you obey their authority. If you don't, they have a problem. They have tools to solve this problem — jail, floggings, putting people to death, torture, endless bureaucracy — but the challenge from the Christian makes these tools less than effective. Why? It's because the Christian is willing to suffer for the cause of Christ. Worse, the reason for this willingness is easy to explain and at the same time lifts up Jesus Christ. Peter puts it well: just who do you think we should obey? Should we obey you, or God? The answer, as the physicists would say it, is intuitively obvious to the casual observer.

It goes further than that. Remember that in intercession is always the superior who intercedes for the inferior. This is why we are commanded to pray for those in authority over us.¹² Paul makes it clear why we are to do so. It is in obedience to God's will that all might be saved — including those in

¹² First Timothy 2:1-4

authority over us. If you think about it, we are superior to them in the eyes of Christ — who has all authority in heaven and on Earth. We are the children of God; they are the children of men. It is therefore fitting and proper that we should pray for them, both that they might execute their function as they should and that they might be saved.

We need to remember just who's in charge in this universe.

Reaction

Acts 4:23-31 NASB When they had been released, they went to their own *companions* and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. (24) And when they heard *this*, they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said, "O Lord, it is You who MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA, AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM, (25) who by the Holy Spirit, *through* the mouth of our father David Your servant, said, 'WHY DID THE GENTILES RAGE, AND THE PEOPLES DEVISE FUTILE THINGS? (26) 'THE KINGS OF THE EARTH TOOK THEIR STAND, AND THE RULERS WERE GATHERED TOGETHER AGAINST THE LORD AND AGAINST HIS CHRIST.' (27) "For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, (28) to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur. (29) "And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence, (30) while You extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus." (31) And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and *began* to speak the word of God with boldness.

The Church's Prayer

The first thing the church does is to go in prayer to God. This is a very commendable instinct. We may learn from their prayer just how we are to react in times when the authorities trouble us.

- ✚ The church begins with praise: they acknowledge who God is. It's a useful comparison. The local authorities think themselves supreme; it is well to remember who the creator of heaven and Earth is.
- ✚ They acknowledge God's control of events — and by implication they acknowledge the fact that they do not know what the future will hold. How often we forget to do this! We need to remember the providence of God as well as his love for us.
- ✚ Next, they asked that they might be bold in speaking the word. Notice that not asking to escape the consequences of this boldness, nor are they asking to be relieved of the responsibility of speaking, but they are asking that they might be given the courage to do what they are commanded to do.
- ✚ Finally, they ask God to deliver the signs and miracles by which those in authority might be convinced. It seems these things are no longer done — but we can ask.

What They Did Not Pray for

There is a most curious omission in this prayer: they did not ask to be delivered from persecution. It's probably the first thing a modern Christian would ask for. We want to get rid of the problem. Their purpose was to preach the gospel, and therefore they saw the persecution as a tool to forward that goal. Whether or not they were persecuted made no real difference, as long as the gospel was preached boldly.

Notice also that they did not seek to reach an accommodation with the authorities. There is no sense here of trying to make a reasonable compromise. This is not always recommended; after all, if the dispute is about whether or not you stand on a street corner or sit in the storefront nearby, it may be reasonable to try to come to some accommodation. The authorities in this instance want the apostles to shut up — and that's the one thing they're not going to do.¹³

Considering that these authorities are diametrically opposed to the message of Christ, it may surprise you that the apostles do not pray for the distraction of these authorities. Neither as individuals, nor as a government do we see the apostles asking God to wipe out their opponents. It is the will of God that all might be saved — including the nasty so-and-so's who are opposed to us.

"Through the Name"

One focus the apostles had that seems to have been lost today is the concept of "the Name of Christ." The apostles were greatly zealous for this. We can easily see why:

- ✚ The Name is the source of all authority in heaven and on Earth.¹⁴ Once we understand this, the conflict with the local authorities becomes much easier to deal with.
- ✚ Indeed, the apostles baptized new followers into the Name. We follow this tradition today, perhaps not thinking about it. But it was very important to the apostles, because it meant that the one person in the universe who had the authority to forgive your sins was doing so as you were baptized.
- ✚ Finally, it is clear that at the return of Christ every knee shall bow in honor of the Name of Christ.¹⁵

It is just possible that we have missed something here. Perhaps in our quest to make Jesus our good buddy we have forgotten the honor, power and glory of his Name. If you want a personal relationship with someone, you must start with knowing who they are. Some of us don't really know who Jesus is.

¹³ This lesson was prepared in May, 2012. The contemporary reader is invited to compare this situation with the response of the Roman Catholic Church to the requirements of Obama-care.

¹⁴ Matthew 28:10

¹⁵ Philippians 2:9-11

Drop Dead - Acts 4:32 – 5:16

We now come to one of the stranger passages of the New Testament. If this happened in our day, perhaps our sermons would not be so meek and mild.

Acts 4:32-5:16 NASB And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one *of them* claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them. (33) And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all. (34) For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales (35) and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need. (36) Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), (37) and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. (5:1) But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, (2) and kept back *some* of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet. (3) But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back *some* of the price of the land? (4) "While it remained *unsold*, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." (5) And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it. (6) The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him. (7) Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. (8) And Peter responded to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?" And she said, "Yes, that was the price." (9) Then Peter *said* to her, "Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out *as well*." (10) And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. (11) And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things. (12) At the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place among the people; and they were all with one accord in Solomon's portico. (13) But none of the rest dared to associate with them; however, the people held them in high esteem. (14) And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to *their number*, (15) to such an extent that they even carried the sick out into the streets and laid them on cots and pallets, so that when Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on any one of them. (16) Also the people from the cities in the vicinity of Jerusalem were coming together, bringing people who were sick or afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all being healed.

Sacrilege

Definition

The concept of sacrilege is one which has been often neglected in the evangelical churches. Indeed, many such churches make it a point to proclaim that there is no such thing as a sacred object. Throughout the history of Christianity this has been a distinctly minority view. Sacrilege is directed irreverence.

- ✚ It may be directed at a *person*. This is more common in churches which have priests and bishops, but it must be admitted that even the humblest of pastors bears a certain dignity which should be respected. Interestingly, most of the sacrilege directed at a person in the evangelical churches comes from the person himself. We have lost the sense that the pastor is a representative of the Lord God Almighty; the pastor himself is often foremost in making fun of this concept.
- ✚ It may be directed at a *place*. This is something the Jew of Peter's time would understand clearly; we have only to think of Christ driving out the moneychangers to understand his attitude towards sacrilege directed at the Temple. We may have lost the sense too; graffiti seems to be well tolerated.
- ✚ It may be directed at a *thing*. Certain items are set aside for the use, exclusively, of the church. These things are sacred — that's what the word means, set aside. When these things are treated with irreverence, that is sacrilege. If someone picks up a communion plate cover and uses it as a Frisbee, that is sacrilege.

The reader who is Roman Catholic may find these explanations both simplistic and unnecessary. The evangelical reader will understand the need for the explanations.

Sacred Money

It may strike the evangelical reader as being a bit odd that any sum of money could possibly be considered sacred. Indeed, we may ask why this action by Ananias and Sapphira was considered sacrilege. Consider these points:

- ✚ First, there is the Jewish view of land. To the Orthodox Jew land was not simply a commodity to be bought and sold. Rather, it was a gift from God who remained its ultimate owner. Though it was no longer practiced, the Old Testament specified that land could be redeemed even after it had been sold. So the proceeds from selling land would carry something of a sacred aura to start with.
- ✚ It's just possible that Ananias was tempted by the example of Barnabas. Given this attitude towards land, it is likely that Barnabas, in the process of giving the proceeds from the sale of his land, was greatly praised by the congregation. It would be viewed as a significant good work. The temptation is to seek the same reputation without the same sacrifice.
- ✚ There is also a sense of what has been called Christian communism. The church at this time experienced that fervor which enables its members to sacrifice on behalf of each other. This is something which seems to be singularly missing in the modern church. The late Ray Stedman put it this way:

Here is where the problem lies with many churches today. There is unity, there is a oneness of spirit, but there is no experience of it in the soul. It is quite possible to come to church and sit together in the pews, united in a physical presence with other Christians, to sing the same hymns and listen to the same message, and relate to God individually, but to have no sense of body life, no sense of belonging to one another. It is possible to come week after week, year after year, and never know the people with whom you worship. When that happens there is no unity in the soul. This is what our younger generation today, in desperation, is trying to tell us. "There is no soul in your services," they say to the church at large, "there is no sense of oneness. You don't belong to each other. You may belong to God, but you don't belong to each other." That is what is lacking today, and what the early church so wonderfully possessed.

Testing God

A concept from the Old Testament, quoted by Christ himself in his reply to Satan during the temptation in the wilderness, is that you are not put the Lord God to the test.¹⁶ The concept is rather an inelastic one. It means that you are not to presume upon God's behavior, except as he has commanded you to do so. The most common example in modern life concerns forgiveness. The argument goes something like this: God is a loving God. He is a forgiving God. Therefore, I will do as I please, sin to my heart's content, and God will forgive me. You wouldn't accept that argument from your children; what makes you think God will take it from you? This is a form of testing God.

Now, perhaps, you can see the sacrilege. Ananias proclaims to the world that the entire price of the land is dedicated to God. In other words, it's now God's money. But Ananias will take a little bit for himself, without mentioning it to anyone. More directly, he's stealing from God. In so doing, he is testing the mercy of God — which we are commanded not to do. It is never a wise thing to assume that God won't care.

Of course, the real question here in your mind is not theft from God, nor sacrilege but why did Ananias and Sapphira have to drop dead? After all, is theft a capital crime? Well, it was in those days. But the issue is not theft, it is sacrilege. God expects his people to handle his things in his way. If you'd like a really good example of just how strict God is in that regard, you might want to remember the time during which David tried to bring the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem.¹⁷

Hypocrisy

If there is one sin that most of us at least pretend to despise, it is hypocrisy.

Is This Hypocrisy?

Of course, the first question is whether or not this really is hypocrisy. So perhaps we should take some time to define the word. Hypocrisy, put simply, is the pretense of being virtuous. The word itself comes from the concept of being an actor; it simply means that someone is faking it. The concept has been made less than clear by the fact that, often enough, hypocrisy is in allegation used in arguing with someone who disagrees with you.

Let's be clear: hypocrisy is not the same thing as moral failure. If you say that lying is a sin, and we know that you're a liar, that is NOT hypocrisy. Nor is it an argument that proves that lying is not a sin. If you tell us that you never lie, and condemn lying as a sin (but still do it), that is hypocrisy. The fact that you're a hypocrite is not an argument which says that lying is not a sin. All it really tells us is that you're a hypocrite. Hypocrisy requires the pretense of virtue. The fact that someone was a hypocrite is actually an argument telling us what when he's pretending to exemplify is really a virtue.¹⁸

¹⁶ Leviticus 25:23

¹⁷ 2nd Samuel 6:6-7

¹⁸ Those familiar with formal logic will recognize the argument of *tu quoque* (Latin for "you too.")

Now you understand why Ananias and Sapphira are hypocrites. It's not just that they're lying about the amount of money; it's that they are pretending that they virtuously gave all of it God. There's the pretense of virtue; there's the hypocrisy.

How Could a Loving God

Think about it this way: of all the sinners Christ ever encountered in his ministry on earth, with whom did he get mad? He had his choice of thieves, political zealots, adulterers, prostitutes and any of the other assorted sinners. He was kind and gentle with all except those who were hypocrites or committed sacrilege in the Temple. Christ never cleared out a house of prostitution. He drove the moneychangers from the Temple. The problem is simply this: if God is a loving God, then like all lovers he is jealous for his beloved. C. S. Lewis put it this way:

You asked for a loving God: you have one. The great spirit you so lightly invoked, the "lord of terrible aspect," is present; not a senile benevolence that drowsily wishes you to be happy in your own way; not the cold philanthropy of a conscientious magistrate, nor the care of a host who feels responsible for the comfort of his guests, but the consuming fire Himself, the Love that made the worlds, persistent as an artist's love for his work and despotic as a man's love for a dog, provident and venerable as a father's love for his child, jealous, inexorable, exacting as love between the sexes.

That's how God feels about his church. He loves us so much that he sent his only Son to die for us on the cross. Do you think that afterwards he would lose interest in the well-being of his Son's own body?

Implications

So why is God so furious about hypocrisy? Because he loves us, that's why. Because he loves us he wants us to repent. Because if we are hypocrites, we won't repent. Therefore God must take drastic action to break our hypocrisy; otherwise it becomes the unforgivable sin. You think not? Look at it this way: repentance is a process. It starts with the recognition that you are a sinner. If you will not make that recognition, you have no reason to go on to confess your sins and then repent. If you will not confess and repent, you will not be forgiven. If you can't complete the process, you cannot be forgiven. Remember: God wants that none of us will perish, but that all will be forgiven and receive eternal life.

Therefore, God cleans house. As Christ drove the money changers from the Temple, so the hypocrite risks being driven from the church. If he cleans house now, how much more will he clean house when he returns? It is well that we remember the parable of the wheat and tares.¹⁹ We might also do well to remember that sometimes he's not so patient with hypocrites.

Leadership

We may now examine the results of this episode and Peter's leadership in it.

¹⁹ Matthew 13:24-30

Results for the Church

As you can well imagine, this episode had quite a big effect on the church — and on the rest of the people of Jerusalem as well.

- ✚ It caused a great deal of fear within the church, and outside. We are told that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; perhaps this is just an outstanding example of that.
- ✚ We also see that the dividing line between the church and the world becomes much sharper. Those who might be tempted to go to church just for the experience of it now realize that it's quite a serious thing. They held the church in high esteem, but didn't want make the commitment.²⁰
- ✚ Most important, we see the power of the church. Christ told his apostles that they would do greater things than he did. There is no record of anyone being healed by having Christ's shadow fall on them — unlike Peter.

What Peter DIDN'T Do

There is an enormous sense of confidence in what Peter is doing. We may examine a few things that Peter did not do as examples for Christian leadership.

- ✚ We might ask: just exactly how did Peter know that Ananias and Sapphira were lying? There was no investigation; no committee of elders to examine the problem. There was no formal sense of church discipline being applied. We may conclude from this that Peter got his information from the Holy Spirit. We may conclude from that Peter was directly in touch with the Holy Spirit. What we may conclude about the modern church remains to be seen.
- ✚ Even more puzzling: why didn't Peter send someone to tell Sapphira that her husband had just dropped dead? It would seem to be elementary courtesy to let her know; she might even want to be invited to the funeral. Peter didn't do that. It's obvious that he knew that she was equally guilty; she was also to share the same fate. This is a hard, cold thing to do. That means that Peter was capable of doing hard, cold things. Sometimes, that's what you have to do.
- ✚ One thing is certain: no compromise. The idea that you would fail to uphold righteousness just so that your attendance might increase seems to have no place in Peter's thinking. Perhaps the modern church should examine its own position on this and see if she can say the same.

What Peter Did Do

May I point out, as a first thing, just how Peter stated the case?

- ✚ He tells both of them that they have been moved and controlled by Satan. In the modern church it's tough to get the word Satan even mentioned; the thought that he would be a motive or a controlling spirit is nowhere to be found. Peter recognized the existence, power and evil of Satan.
- ✚ He tells them both that they are lying to God. This would be shocking behavior today; I'm not sure we would be able to form such a charge. But I point out two things: first, they were lying. It's a sin. Second, they were lying to the one person who would know, absolutely, that's just what they were doing. At the very least, this was not smart. But see how Peter puts the charge to them directly.
- ✚ He points out to them that the money was their's once they sold the property. It wasn't dedicated to God just because they sold it; they could quite honestly have given a part of it and kept the rest.

²⁰ This point seems almost impossible today in our church. People seem to ooze into the church; baptism is called "the next step on your spiritual journey." Confession and repentance seem extraneous now.

Behind this, we may see one point: the church is to be kept separate; sacred. We are to be "in the world, not of the world." The results of that separation are seen here. You will notice that Peter and the other apostles continued to speak "boldly". When the church is really the church, sacred to God and separate from the world, then she can speak with holy boldness. When the church tries to become part of the world, the stone of stumbling and the rock of offense must be discarded.

Providence and Suffering - Acts 5:17-42

We begin with the story.

Acts 5:17-42 NASB But the high priest rose up, along with all his associates (that is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with jealousy. (18) They laid hands on the apostles and put them in a public jail. (19) But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the gates of the prison, and taking them out he said, (20) "Go, stand and speak to the people in the temple the whole message of this Life." (21) Upon hearing *this*, they entered into the temple about daybreak and *began* to teach. Now when the high priest and his associates came, they called the Council together, even all the Senate of the sons of Israel, and sent *orders* to the prison house for them to be brought. (22) But the officers who came did not find them in the prison; and they returned and reported back, (23) saying, "We found the prison house locked quite securely and the guards standing at the doors; but when we had opened up, we found no one inside." (24) Now when the captain of the temple *guard* and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them as to what would come of this. (25) But someone came and reported to them, "The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!" (26) Then the captain went along with the officers and *proceeded* to bring them *back* without violence (for they were afraid of the people, that they might be stoned). (27) When they had brought them, they stood them before the Council. The high priest questioned them, (28) saying, "We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and yet, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and intend to bring this man's blood upon us." (29) But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. (30) "The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross. (31) "He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. (32) "And we are witnesses of these things; and *so is* the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him." (33) But when they heard this, they were cut to the quick and intended to kill them. (34) But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the Law, respected by all the people, stood up in the Council and gave orders to put the men outside for a short time. (35) And he said to them, "Men of Israel, take care what you propose to do with these men. (36) "For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a group of about four hundred men joined up with him. But he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. (37) "After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census and drew away *some* people after him; he too perished, and all those who followed him were scattered. (38) "So in the present case, I say to you, stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action is of men, it will be overthrown; (39) but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God." (40) They took his advice; and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and *then* released them. (41) So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for *His* name. (42) And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus *as* the Christ.

Government

May I point out the key verse in this chapter which concerns government: verse 28.

Strict Orders

Perhaps it would help if we began with an explanation of the players. There are two groups of people in the Jewish Council at this time:

- ✚ The Pharisees, who are the right wing religious fundamentalists of the day. They add a great deal to the interpretation of the Old Testament, but they rigorously insist upon the authority of all that we would call today the Old Testament.
- ✚ The Sadducees might be considered the intellectual wing. They accept as authoritative only the first five books of the Bible. They do not believe in angels, nor do they believe in life after death. They certainly do not accept the possibility of the resurrection.

It is important to note that the Sadducees are the ones who are most directly concerned with silencing the apostles. Their motive is quite clear (verse 17) — jealousy. They consider themselves to be the experts on religion; they now are confronted with unlearned men who can heal the lame and the sick in the name of this Jesus of Nazareth. Their complaint against the apostles this time is clear:

- ✚ First, they have already given orders to the apostles to shut up. These people are used to being obeyed; they don't know what to do with polite defiance.
- ✚ Second, the teaching is enormously popular. One reason for this is simply that it's easier to understand than the complicated theories produced by the Sadducees. Another great reason for it is that genuine forgiveness from God is included.
- ✚ The point that hits home the most is this: even the simplest history of the crucifixion and resurrection makes it clear that the Sadducees are among the primary culprits in railroading Jesus of Nazareth to death on the Cross. Nobody likes to feel guilty.

Of course, the apostles have a different view. While recognizing the authority of this Council in most matters, they have a conflict here which is irreconcilable. God has told them to preach the gospel; the Council has told them to shut up. It is a direct contradiction; one aspect comes from God; the apostles will obey God, not man. They will do this at whatever price is required.

Filled Jerusalem with Your Teaching

The nature of the teaching of the apostles is fairly clear. We may see their main points as follows:

- ✚ They preach that Jesus of Nazareth was, is and always will be the Messiah of the Jews, the Christ. This may seem obvious to us today, to the point that it is no longer preached as being too familiar to mention. At this time, however, this was news. It was good news, at that, and we sometimes forget that that is what the word "gospel" means.
- ✚ They preach the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Please note that there is absolutely no thought whatsoever of it being a "spiritual resurrection." It is a physical resurrection; no other possibility ever occurred to the eyewitnesses.
- ✚ If the fact they preach is the resurrection, the doctrine that goes with it is grace. The command is simply this: repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins.
- ✚ Finally, they proclaim the fact that they are eyewitnesses to all the facts they are teaching. It's personal.

Bring This Man's Blood

There is a specific question: just who is responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ? We are told that tour guides in Jerusalem, prior to the Israelis taking the city in 1967, always told tourists that

the Jews were responsible. After the Israelis took over, they said the Romans were. The Sadducees here are in no doubt; if the crucifixion was a horrible miscarriage of justice, they are responsible for it. There is blame enough to share among other groups, of course.

If you want the right answers, you have to ask the right questions. We might better ask who is ultimately responsible for the crucifixion. The answer, in general, is that we are. If mankind did not sin, there would be no need for grace. If there was no need for grace, there would have been no crucifixion. Even at 2000 years distance in time, we can still say that it is our own fault. If you say that Christ died for your sins, you are perforce saying that you helped cause the crucifixion. He took my place.

May we return to the question of government for a moment? The fact of sin can be denied, but sin remains. We cannot avoid it. But we may ask what responsibility the church has in dealing with sin in the society in which it finds itself. I submit to you that the answer is different for the apostles that it is for us. The apostles lived in a dictatorship, namely, the Roman Empire. In their lifetimes the church was so infinitesimally small as to have virtually no influence on such things as legislation or public morality. Another 250 years would pass before they even began to have such influence. But in our time the church is a large portion of our society — and we live in a democracy. I submit to you that living in a democracy implies responsibility for the citizen which does not exist in a dictatorship. At the very least, the Christian citizen has the obligation to vote. We are citizens of the kingdom of heaven; we are also citizens of our own nation. That citizenship implies responsibility. It is a historical fact that the church has most commonly spoken out on issues of sin and morality. Why?

Proverbs 14:34 NASB Righteousness exalts a nation, But sin is a disgrace to *any* people.

If you love your country, you will want to see it do well, not disgraced. This does not imply that we sit around with our mouths shut and our fingers pinching our noses tightly closed.

Providence

Permit me to bring to you a definition of the word which has fallen out of favor with preachers: Providence.

In theology, the care and superintendence which God exercises over his creatures. He that acknowledges a creation and denies a providence, involves himself in a palpable contradiction; for the same power which caused a thing to exist is necessary to continue its existence. Some persons admit a general providence, but deny a particular providence, not considering that a general providence consists of particulars. A belief in divine providence, is a source of great consolation to good men. By divine providence is often understood God himself.

The above was taken from the original Webster's dictionary, published in 1828. The reader should note that in the earlier documents of the American Republic the word "Providence" is often used as a substitute for the word "God." An excellent example of this may be found in the writings of George Washington. You should please note that the Providence of God sometimes includes the miraculous, but most often does not. It often appears to be simply a divine coincidence. The reader having difficulty with the idea that God sustains his creation as well as having created it should read the second chapter of Philippians.

This account contains three instances of God's Providence: the release from prison, the attitude of the crowd and the words of Gamaliel.

Release from Prison

The release from prison may seem to you to be thunderously miraculous — after all, God sends an angel to do the work. But please notice that he does this in the middle of the night, without alarming the sentries (in fact, they are completely ignorant of the departure). There is nothing triumphant about it; it is not a display of God's power but of his care. As God told Zechariah,

Zechariah 4:6 NASB Then he said to me, "This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel saying, 'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' says the LORD of hosts.

Note what this means: the fact that the angel has released them from prison does not confer upon them any particular power. This is an important aspect of God's Providence; if you receive his favor in this way, it does not mean that you have been given some sort of spiritual gift. It means that he has helped you.

Afraid of the People

One of the great inconsistencies in the early church history is the attitude of people in the mob of the ordinary. Sometimes we find that the mob is outraged by Christianity; sometimes, as here, the mob receives the word with gladness — and protects those who are delivering it. There seems to be no pattern to this, and it does not seem to be something over which the early church had any great control.

Of course, when it comes to public relations, we should have a good reputation. It's even more preferable to have a reputation which honestly represents what we mean. I was once given three rules for handling any public relations crisis:

- ✚ Tell the truth.
- ✚ Tell it quickly.
- ✚ Tell it with class.

Notice that in these instructions there is no sense of buying a reputation using the method of changing our moral values to match the political correctness of the moment.

Gamaliel's Advice

We must begin with a little bit of background history. In the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions Gamaliel is honored as "Saint Gamaliel." Jewish tradition, as you might expect, does not recognize any conversion on the part of Gamaliel. The evidence for this conversion does not date to the first century; in fact, the earliest evidence is not for another couple hundred years. The proclamation of Gamaliel as a saint did not occur until the ninth century. It appears rather unlikely that Gamaliel was actually a Christian, or that he ever converted. But the reader should be aware that this is proclaimed by the two largest portions of Christianity.

Sometimes you find God's Providence in the most unlikely places — or unlikely things or unlikely people. That's a characteristic of God's Providence: it defies human expectations. The apostles did not think they were going to get sprung from jail by means of an angel. They certainly weren't expecting a Jewish Pharisee to speak up for them.

God's Providence is directly related to God's sovereignty. As far as we know, Gamaliel was a man who attempted to please God with his conduct. You can see from his remarks that his concern is not for appearances, or to soothe the jealousy of the Sadducees, but rather to do what God wants him to do. Such a man may be used as the instrument of God's Providence, without his own knowledge of it. Similarly, if you are surrendered to God and willing to do his will, you may be a divine Providence for someone else without knowing it.

Suffering

Peter might well have ask at this point: "if God is favoring me with his divine Providence, why did I get flogged? Why am I suffering?" It's a good question. We often have the idea that if we are on the side of the Almighty, the trip should be a smooth one. Peter learned otherwise:

1 Peter 4:12-17 NASB Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; (13) but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. (14) If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. (15) Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; (16) but if *anyone suffers* as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name. (17) For *it is* time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if *it begins* with us first, what *will be* the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?

It appears, therefore, that suffering is a normal part of the life of a true Christian. Indeed, as one author put it, if you don't have a thorn in your flesh and suffering in your life – at least eventually – then you ought to question whether or not you're really a Christian. So why then does God give us suffering as well as Providence?

Suffering Keeps Us Humble

My daughter, who writes science fiction with a lot of superheroes in it, pointed out something to me. At least in the early days of the comics, whenever Superman walked alongside Batman, Superman floated a few inches off the ground. Batman walked like the rest of us. Sore feet remind you that you are human. Similarly, suffering reminds you that you are not perfect; you are a sinner. Which is a reminder also that you need to do something about it.

Humility seems to have very little to recommend it. Our society takes great pride in being proud; arrogance is proclaimed to our children to be a virtue, particularly in athletic competition. But have you ever noticed that humility carries with it a certain attractiveness? You might admire a man who is a strutting, arrogant athlete — but you probably wouldn't enjoy his company very long. In fact, you'd think he was a jerk. You'd much rather talk with someone who's genuinely interested in you. Such a person has humility. We might not want to have it ourselves, but we cherish it in others.

Suffering Keeps Us Dependent on God

Some things are only taught by experience.

- ✦ By suffering God gives us the grace of perseverance.²¹
- ✦ Suffering also teaches us that God's strength is best shown in weakness.²²
- ✦ Suffering prepares us for future work²³ — a process which is often referred to in the Scripture as "perfecting."

Think about it: when you seek someone with whom to share your troubles, or someone to pray with you in your difficulties, don't you look for someone who has had the same kind of problems that you have? If you want to be that person, you have to have those problems.

Worthy to Suffer for the Name

It is quite the case that God's Providence will be available for God's purposes. It logically follows that God's Providence will be opposed by Satan's efforts. If you are the beneficiary of God's Providence, then it is highly likely you will be the beneficiary of Satan's opposition. In a sense, it means that Satan thinks that you are a worthy opponent — at least, worthy of a little aggravation. When that happens (notice that I did not say "if") you should rejoice — you have been honored.

It means more than that. If you are standing firm in the faith, despite the suffering you are having, that's a very good sign of your salvation.²⁴ It also means that Satan is trying to shake you out of it. Greater faith often means a rockier road.

Always remember that God is just. If you suffer for him, he will reward you for that — if you will be faithful about it. The author of Hebrews puts it this way:

Hebrews 10:32-39 NASB But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, (33) partly by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated. (34) For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one. (35) Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. (36) For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. (37) FOR YET IN A VERY LITTLE WHILE, HE WHO IS COMING WILL COME, AND WILL NOT DELAY. (38) BUT MY RIGHTEOUS ONE SHALL LIVE BY FAITH; AND IF HE SHRINKS BACK, MY SOUL HAS NO PLEASURE IN HIM. (39) But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul.

The difference between courage and cowardice is often simply five more minutes of endurance. Take courage; endure the suffering put before you. God will never put you through something which will completely overwhelm you, if you lean on him. Remember, at the end, the reward is great. If we suffer with him, we shall reign with him.²⁵

²¹ Romans 5:3

²² 2nd Corinthians 12:10

²³ James 1:2-4

²⁴ Philippians 1:27-30

²⁵ 2nd Timothy 2:12

Sorcery - Acts 8:1-25

Samaritans

As a bit of background, this section is preceded by the story of Stephen, the first Christian martyr.

Acts 8:1-8 NASB Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. (2) *Some* devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him. (3) But Saul *began* ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison. (4) Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word. (5) Philip went down to the city of Samaria and *began* proclaiming Christ to them. (6) The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. (7) For *in the case of* many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out *of them* shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed. (8) So there was much rejoicing in that city.

No Good Samaritans

Over the centuries Samaria was not a particularly good place in which to live. The people of this country have been deported several times by various empires. They were then replaced with other people who adopted some, but not all, of Jewish religious practice. This did not endear them to the Jews living in Judea. The Samaritans felt they had the more reasonable religion; the Jews referred to the Samaritans as the worst possible people, apostates. They were in Jewish land, but they did not worship at the Temple.

Most of us are familiar with the parable of the Good Samaritan. The more frequent student of the Bible will of course recall Christ's encounter with the Samaritan woman²⁶. But Christ also explicitly told his disciples that they were to be witnesses in Samaria, spreading the gospel there after it had gone through Judea²⁷. So clearly Christ had it in mind that the Samaritans were to receive the gospel. This, however, seems to have had no effect on the early church up to this point.

The First Samaritan Campaign

May I point out that the motivation for this evangelical campaign is the persecution of the church in Jerusalem? Despite the command of Christ, the church has no interest in spreading the gospel to those second-rate Samaritans. It is not too far-fetched to imagine that God allowed this persecution because it would cause his church to flee into areas outside of Jerusalem — and there spread the gospel. We sometimes wonder why trouble comes to the church. Perhaps this is an example of God using that trouble to further his purposes. It is an interesting question: is there something the church is not doing today which will cause God to bring out persecution again?

²⁶ John 4:4-42

²⁷ Acts 1:1-8

The modern scholar of evangelism would be quick to point out that the primary evangelist here, Philip, is in fact Greek. From the Samaritan point of view he doesn't come with the baggage of being Jewish. He is therefore more likely to be accepted by the Samaritans. I suspect that being able to work miracles and heal people didn't hurt, either.

What is very interesting here is not just the miracles, but the fact that (as we shall see in the next section) the Holy Spirit did not come upon these people. This has interesting implications for those who are Pentecostals; particularly those who hold that unless you speak in tongues you do not have the gift of the Holy Spirit. I leave to the reader any further deductions.

Persecution

We might well ask the question: did God permit this persecution because the church was not obedient to his command? It is fairly clear that the persecution has the desirable effect of spreading the gospel. That would be sufficient reason for God to allow it. The open question is whether or not God uses persecution to cleanse his church and return it to a state of obedience. You might think this is particularly irrelevant; we are not under the Roman Empire and Christians are not regularly flogged, at least in the United States. But there seems to be a cycle in this. The church begins to grow comfortable and happy with things as they are. Life is good. Then along comes persecution of one sort or another, and the church must respond. Life is uncomfortable. I suspect this is God's method of keeping his church from going to sleep. This, of course, brings up the question: just how comfortable is the church today? And what does that forebode for the near future?

Interestingly enough, the response to persecution as commanded in the Gospels is not defiance.

Matthew 10:23 NASB "But whenever they persecute you in one city, flee to the next; for truly I say to you, you will not finish *going through* the cities of Israel until the Son of Man comes.

We are, like Monty Python, to "run away, run away, run away." To those of us of the masculine persuasion this seems rather cowardly. The point is strategic: rather than show tremendous resistance to small persecution, we will take the church, spread it all out, and let the evangelism grow the church into a mighty army. The solution to a small army seems to be a small army of recruiters. Persecution seems to have a number of desirable effects:

- ✚ It calls us to a life of sacrifice. The world sees sacrifice as evidence of the truth.
- ✚ It forces us to change, and to grow.

This is not an encouragement to behave so obnoxiously that we invite persecution. It is God's tool, not ours.

The Sorcerer

Acts 8:9-13 NASB Now there was a man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great; (10) and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, "This man is what is called the Great Power of God." (11) And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts. (12) But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men

and women alike. (13) Even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip, and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed.

Magic

Why do people do magic? There are a number of reasons. It's entirely possible that throughout most of human history the magician was viewed as a powerful man, the kind of person you wanted as a friend. They might look at you also as being someone who was intrinsically superior; not everybody can be a witch doctor. There are three basic methods of convincing the world that you are such a magician:

- ✚ There is the art of illusion, as practiced by stage magicians today. This takes a keen eye and a quick hand, along with a good sense of patter. If you think of the common card tricks, you have this as a good example.
- ✚ There is the more sinister method: by Satan. Most first world Christians think this can't be done; most Third World missionaries know that it is done.
- ✚ A third method is by science. One of the most famous examples of this concerned the magician who mounted a large electromagnet under the stage and used it to turn the local strongman into someone who appeared quite weak.

Magician's Purpose

Why would you want to be such a magician?

- ✚ One a good reason is power. Even if your capabilities are based entirely on illusion, that is often sufficient to motivate other people to do what you want to do.
- ✚ Another reason is prestige. Computer geeks are quite well aware of this; there's nothing quite to touch putting on your wizard hat and then fixing someone's computer. They may be mad at the delay or thankful for your help, but they are in awe of your skills.
- ✚ One reason you might not have thought of is persuasion. After all, a man who could do magic must be a particularly intelligent individual. He therefore is worth listening to. A similar example may be found in various modern scientists who are quite willing to give their opinions on matters political.

The Church and the Magician

All this is quite interesting, of course, but the real question is what is the church going to do about it? How do we respond to the magician, or his modern counterpart, the scientist? There are at least two wrong answers.

The first wrong answer is an open alliance. Let me give you an illustration. There is a classic movie, *The Keys of the Kingdom*, which portrays a priest who happens to cure the daughter of the village head man. The head man, wanting to do the right thing, comes to the priest and announces his intention to become a Christian. His rationale is simple: the priest has done him the greatest favor he could possibly get, and he will return that with the greatest favor he can possibly give. He will become a Christian; the entire village will now follow his example.

The priest refuses the offer. He knows the man is sincere; he knows that he's trying to do the priest a great favor; but he also knows the man's heart is not in the right place. The temptation is, however, to use the powerful of this world — with a winking agreement — to "further the kingdom." It does not work; it never has.

Of course, one could pick the second wrong answer. That method is to use the magician — but at arm's length. We see this in modern preaching. The temptation is to derive your sermon — say, on the subject of how to get along with your wife — from some popular psychology magazine that you bought at the grocery store. You then look in the Bible for verses from Proverbs which seem to support the psychologist's opinions. Your real authority is not the Bible, but the psychologist. It's just that it sounds better to the modern ear to quote the psychologist. It increases attendance and offerings; therefore, it must be from God. {For those of you who are thick headed, that last was satire.}

Money and Spirit

Acts 8:14-25 NASB Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, (15) who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. (16) For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. (17) Then they *began* laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit. (18) Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, (19) saying, "Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." (20) But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! (21) "You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. (22) "Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you. (23) "For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity." (24) But Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me." (25) So, when they had solemnly testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they started back to Jerusalem, and were preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.

Laying on of Hands

We begin with this question of laying on of hands. This passage has caused a goodly amount of difficulty in the church. It seems to imply that the gift of the Holy Spirit — that is to say, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, something common to all real Christians — is given by the laying on of hands. Despite a lack of evidence to the contrary, when the church decided that it needed priests it also decided that they needed to have hands laid on them which had a chain of laying hands back to the apostles. This doctrine is known as "Apostolic Succession". It is held by the Roman Catholic Church and many mainstream denominations. Real Christians, it seems, must have this chain of hands all the way back to the apostles.

The one problem with this particular doctrine is that it declares that the Holy Spirit is at the command of the church. There are other instances where the Holy Spirit comes upon the church or various individuals without this. Indeed, as our Lord pointed out,

John 3:8 NASB "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

The question is carried even further in Pentecostal circles. Although miracles are being done here, we have no direct evidence that they are done by anyone who has not had hands laid upon them. Some Pentecostals conclude, therefore, that you must have hands laid upon you by someone who already works miracles if you're going to work miracles too. The miracles in question most often are

those of speaking in tongues — about which the rest of evangelical Christianity is a bit doubtful. I leave the matter entirely to the reader; merely wishing to point out that there is a good deal of controversy about this.

Give Me This Authority

One of the principles that we have forgotten in America since the days of our founding is that with authority comes responsibility. Most of us have, at one time or another, worked for a boss who proudly proclaimed that he had all the authority and we had all the responsibility. If something went wrong, it's the peon's fault. Anything going right was entirely to the credit of the leader. Now, if you pursue this method far enough, you get what always happens when authority and responsibility are mismatched: tyranny.

The desire for tyranny comes from the wicked heart. Permit me an example. George Washington did not wish to be the first president of the United States. Benjamin Franklin cajoled him into it. He had no desire to lord it over other people; in fact, he earnestly desired retirement. His moral character was such that the early Republic elected him unanimously. Until recently, his memory was revered by all Americans as a model of what a president should be. I submit to you that this is because he took his responsibilities seriously and exercised such authority as was necessary to complete them. It is not possible to reasonably accuse George Washington of being a tyrant in any respect. The reader is invited to compare this character with the current occupant of the White House (whoever that might be.)

This is particularly important in the church. It is said that Mussolini made the trains run on time; so at least there was some merit in the man. Sometimes, you just have to take what you can get. When that happens, most of us try to do the best we can with the situation available. We know that we can't really change anything. But that's not true in the kingdom of God. The kingdoms of the earth are for sale to the highest bidder; the kingdom of God is not. In fact, trying to purchase a church office for your own gain is considered a sin. That sin has a name: simony.

What's Wrong?

The kingdom of God is within you; that means it's a matter of the heart. If your heart is not right with God, you should not be entrusted with authority in the kingdom of God. You know why; you will misuse it. So what's wrong with Simon's heart?

- ✚ Peter identifies the first part as, "the gall of bitterness." It is fascinating to think that Simon was a bitter man. Here's the magician, the "Great Power." We don't know what was about his life gave him this bitterness, but most of us would assume that the powerful magician has everything he wants. That's not always a good assumption; maybe somebody else got the girl he wanted. The Christian needs the joyful heart.
- ✚ Peter identifies the second part as, "the bondage of iniquity." We don't know what particular sin this might've been, but it is always true that when you sin, you give Satan a handle with which to maneuver you. Particularly for the magician, the common belief is that sin is enlightening. It's the oldest lie in the human race; Satan used it on Eve. Once Satan has that handle he will continue to use it. The sin will become worse and worse — and you will have no choice but to continue to get

worse and worse. You are a slave to anything that controls you; the bondage of iniquity is strong indeed. Ask any drug addict.

Repentance

Simon repents. From the histories of the time — about which there is considerable doubt — it appears that this was not an honest repentance. He asks Peter to pray for him, though. We really don't know what happened next; only God can truly look upon the heart know what is there.

That's the great thing about the kingdom of God, though. It's called "grace." We can imagine the outside; we can measure the tithes, the offering and the service — but God knows the heart. We are encouraged to look upon our own hearts, examine them and take such action as will bring us closer to God. We are also told that we are not to judge someone else. Perhaps we can extend to Simon the benefit of the doubt. It might even be that we need to extend it to someone else as well.

Preparation - Acts 9:32-10:23

Recipe

The reader will pardon me if I ask you to think a little bit ahead. In the next lesson we shall see the first example of a devout Jew (Peter) evangelizing Gentiles. It is not clear to the church today just how big a step this is. But to the Jew of the time, as we shall see, it was practically unthinkable. God is therefore needed to prepare Peter (and Cornelius) for this major change. This lesson is about how God prepared Peter; it may also give us some indication as to how he prepares us for major changes in our lives, too.

Preparation of Peter

Acts 9:32-43 NASB Now as Peter was traveling through all *those regions*, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda. (33) There he found a man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden eight years, for he was paralyzed. (34) Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; get up and make your bed." Immediately he got up. (35) And all who lived at Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord. (36) Now in Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which translated *in Greek* is called Dorcas); this woman was abounding with deeds of kindness and charity which she continually did. (37) And it happened at that time that she fell sick and died; and when they had washed her body, they laid it in an upper room. (38) Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, having heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him, imploring him, "Do not delay in coming to us." (39) So Peter arose and went with them. When he arrived, they brought him into the upper room; and all the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing all the tunics and garments that Dorcas used to make while she was with them. (40) But Peter sent them all out and knelt down and prayed, and turning to the body, he said, "Tabitha, arise." And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter, she sat up. (41) And he gave her his hand and raised her up; and calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. (42) It became known all over Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. (43) And Peter stayed many days in Joppa with a tanner *named* Simon.

What Was Peter Doing?

It is somewhat surprising that the trip Peter was taking was not an evangelistic one. It was also not a trip intended to go anywhere near the Gentiles. In fact, Peter's mission is to minister to and strengthen the church in these areas on the other side of the mountain range which contains Jerusalem. There is some implication that Peter's presence is to provide some of the miracles which will strengthen the faith of the newborn church members. This is a bit dubious as inference because:

- ✚ First, it is not at all clear that only the apostles could work miracles. Certainly church history is full of counter examples.
- ✚ Second, it is fairly well demonstrated that miracles often do not strengthen the faith of the believer. A good example is the ancient Israelite community under Moses.

This is not some sort of royal progress, however. It is interesting to note that Peter stayed in Joppa at the house of a tanner named Simon. A tanner's profession requires him to be ceremonially unclean most of the time. In a sense, this is a halfway house between Judaism and the Gentiles. It is also

an excellent example of the material poverty and humility which so becomes a leader of the church. Peter is following his Lord's instruction to stay at the first available house.²⁸ He stayed for some length of time, which probably implies that the disciples there were in need of much instruction. It is only in recent times that the church has come to the idea that a few weeks with a stack of DVDs will suffice for training of the Christian.

Going Where Called

We might think that God would prepare Peter for what was coming by some sort of angelic message. Consider Peter's character: he likes to argue. So God does not give him the chance to do so. Instead, he goes on to Joppa because the church has called him there as part of an emergency. He is responding to the needs of the church. I suspect that doing this might have given him the feeling of being the yo-yo at the end of the string; but as he was confident in the one who held the other end of the string, this might not be as much of a problem as you might think.

The key lesson for us is this: Peter was doing the good which was at hand. He was responding to the needs of the moment in the way Christ would expect him to do so. This is the habit of obedience, which enables God to do great things through ordinary people.

The Miracles

One of the difficulties the study of the Scripture is that we are given examples, not theological textbooks. Aeneas is an example of this. We have no indication that Peter asked him whether or not his faith was strong enough to believe that he could be healed. Like the lame man at the Temple, all we know about Aeneas is that he needed the help. But there is one thing here that we may note. Peter tells him (in this translation) to get up make his bed. There are two reasons for this. The first is, as your mother told you, you should always make your bed as soon as you get out of it. It is a sign to one and all that Aeneas will no longer be spending all his time in bed. The second reason is the practical one; the other Christians need to see that Aeneas has been healed and now has the strength to make his own bed.

The story of Dorcas is quite touching. It is worth noting that she was a woman who devoted her energies to the care of those would be considered the least among her society — widows. The widow of this time was notorious for complete poverty. We need to be careful about this. The reason God permits Peter to raise this woman from the dead is not really so much that she is kind and charitable. It's not a question of her deserving it. But we can conclude that those who have asked Peter to come did so out of their regard for her. This is a lesson for our prayer life. It is never proper to say that so-and-so *deserves* a miraculous healing. But it is always proper to tell the Lord that the reason I'm asking for such healing is that this person has done good things for me or for those I love. No one deserves the healing; but a Christian knows a lot of people deserve the asking.

²⁸ Luke 9:3-4

Notice to that Peter emulates his master in sending everyone else out of the room.²⁹ Even though he knows that he is about to work a miracle for this woman, he does not make a public spectacle of it. P. T. Barnum he is not.

Cornelius

Acts 10:1-8 NASB Now *there was* a man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort, (2) a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the *Jewish* people and prayed to God continually. (3) About the ninth hour of the day he clearly saw in a vision an angel of God who had *just* come in and said to him, "Cornelius!" (4) And fixing his gaze on him and being much alarmed, he said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God. (5) "Now dispatch *some* men to Joppa and send for a man *named* Simon, who is also called Peter; (6) he is staying with a tanner *named* Simon, whose house is by the sea." (7) When the angel who was speaking to him had left, he summoned two of his servants and a devout soldier of those who were his personal attendants, (8) and after he had explained everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.

Ordinary Holiness

Cornelius is one of those people you find in every society — as backbone. We may note this about him:

- ✚ He is a devout man, what is called a "God-fearer." He is not Jewish, but he fears and worships the Jewish God. Note please that this includes his entire household. Evidently his example was very strong and consistent.
- ✚ He is a man who gives alms. This is not the same thing as making sacrifices at the Temple. Rather, it is the habit of giving to the poor. In his time this is something that would've been done person to person, as the mechanism for such things (the synagogue) would have been unavailable to him. This is a guy who would give money to the fellow with the cardboard sign, sitting by the side of the road.
- ✚ He prayed to God continually. If there is a habit which should be encouraged in all Christians, this is it.

There you have it: an ordinary man with godly habits. This is the man that God will use to break the church out of its Jewish mold.

Preparing Cornelius

The complete ordinariness of Cornelius is exemplified in his reaction to the angel, which is quite typical:

- ✚ He stares at him. The arrival of the angel is approximately the same level of surprise as the arrival of an alien from Mars.
- ✚ He is "much alarmed." The usual opening line for an angel is, "fear not." Being afraid of an angel is the normal reaction.
- ✚ He calls him "Lord." Whoever or whatever the angel is, Cornelius recognizes him as being his superior. Contrast that with our frequent attitude today of thinking of Christ as our good buddy.

²⁹ Mark 5:35-43

The angel tells him that his prayers and gifts have come up to God as a memorial. The word used for memorial is an unusual Greek one. It is also used in this story from the Gospels:

Matthew 26:6-13 NASB Now when Jesus was in Bethany, at the home of Simon the leper, (7) a woman came to Him with an alabaster vial of very costly perfume, and she poured it on His head as He reclined *at the table*. (8) But the disciples were indignant when they saw *this*, and said, "Why this waste? (9) "For this *perfume* might have been sold for a high price and *the money* given to the poor." (10) But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you bother the woman? For she has done a good deed to Me. (11) "For you always have the poor with you; but you do not always have Me. (12) "For when she poured this perfume on My body, she did it to prepare Me for burial. (13) "Truly I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her."

There is a point in here. What this woman has done is an act of devotion — and you'll notice that it doesn't seem to make any sense to the rest of the people around her. Why build a cathedral when any boxlike structure will do? The same may be said of Cornelius and his habit of giving. What's the use? He can't possibly cure all the poverty around him. So it might seem that his giving is useless. Perhaps it is — except to God. His giving is a spotlight by which we may look at his soul. For those who give in the same fashion, it is a reassurance but God knows what you do and will bless you for it.

As is often the case, the angel does not get the chance to wax eloquent. In fact, his instructions are short and to the point. We cannot know, but perhaps angels are always in a hurry. It's a characteristic, however, of God's instructions: economical and to the point.

A Man under Authority

A recent book review in Touchstone magazine included this passage:

One of the defining features of modern culture is the denial of an order in the structure of Creation. In *The Abolition of Man*, C. S. Lewis argues that until the advent of modernity, all human cultures assumed that the principal aim of wise living was to grow in the knowledge of "how to conform the soul to reality." By contrast, the typically modern preoccupation (propelled by technological prowess) is with "how to subdue reality to the wishes of men."

Our Centurion, Cornelius, understands this quite well. You can see it in the way that he has managed his household. There is no sense that he has set himself up as the supreme spiritual authority in their lives. He is not a demigod to be obeyed without question; rather, he is a leader who trusts his people.

Baron von Steuben, the drill master of George Washington's Continental Army, once remarked in frustration that the American soldier — unlike his continental counterpart — needed both an order and the explanation of it. Cornelius had that same kind of loyalty and his household. He trusts these people, and therefore he quite naturally explains the entire mission to them. He does not simply send them with instructions on who to get. He shares the vision — even though he himself does not completely understand it. A man like that understands authority very well.

The Vision

Acts 10:9-23 NASB On the next day, as they were on their way and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. (10) But he became hungry and was desiring to eat; but while they were making preparations, he fell into a trance; (11) and he *saw the sky opened up, and an object like a great sheet coming down, lowered by four corners to the ground, (12) and there were in it all *kinds of* four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air. (13) A voice came to him, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat!" (14) But Peter said, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean." (15) Again a voice *came* to him a second time, "What God has cleansed, no *longer* consider unholy." (16) This happened three times, and immediately the object was taken up into the sky. (17) Now while Peter was greatly perplexed in mind as to what the vision which he had seen might be, behold, the men who had been sent by Cornelius, having asked directions for Simon's house, appeared at the gate; (18) and calling out, they were asking whether Simon, who was also called Peter, was staying there. (19) While Peter was reflecting on the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you. (20) "But get up, go downstairs and accompany them without misgivings, for I have sent them Myself." (21) Peter went down to the men and said, "Behold, I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for which you have come?" (22) They said, "Cornelius, a centurion, a righteous and God-fearing man well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews, was *divinely* directed by a holy angel to send for you *to come* to his house and hear a message from you." (23) So he invited them in and gave them lodging. And on the next day he got up and went away with them, and some of the brethren from Joppa accompanied him.

What's the Problem?

It is difficult for the modern Christian to understand the problem Peter faced. The idea that the Christian in America in the 21st century could possibly have racial or religious prejudice is socially unacceptable. So let's review why Peter would have a problem with talking to the Gentiles:

- ✚ First, there is the Law of Moses. In this law the Jews are commanded to keep themselves separate. They are to be a holy people, sacred to God and kept apart. One of the aspects of this being kept apart is that they had strict dietary laws.
- ✚ Then, those laws had been greatly amplified by tradition. We must remember the tradition, in these days, was greatly respected. The idea that, "our church has only one tradition: we have no traditions" would find a reaction of horror in this time. Tradition was viewed as the wisdom of those who had gone before us.
- ✚ Finally, Peter would've been well acquainted with the virtue of obedience. It is quite the case that none of us is smart enough to figure out every possible situation and know exactly what to do at the time. God understands this; he will look for your obedience. If your obedience is the wrong reaction, he will gently correct you.

How the Vision Is Presented

The first thing I would point out to you about the timing of this vision is this: Peter is hungry. The folks downstairs are in the process of preparing lunch; Peter is using the time to go up to the roof and pray. (It was common in those times to have a rooftop deck, much as we might have a patio deck today.) God's timing often relates to what your body is doing.

You will notice that the vision is presented three times. Whenever you see the numbers three in the Scriptures, you can be quite sure that the commentators are going to have a lovely time discussing why there are three of anything. Here are some of the suggestions:

- ✚ Some will tell you that it is related to the Trinity.
- ✚ Others will point out that Peter denied his Lord three times; was restored three times; and evidently needs to be told anything three times.
- ✚ It's also possibly related to the fact that Cornelius sent three men.

One thing is certain: this is a symbolic vision. When you get a symbolic vision, you usually are going to need some time to work out what the symbolism means. Please note that God does not give Peter the time to do this.

Overcoming

So how does Peter overcome all this law and tradition?

First, note where God has placed him — in the tanner's house. He's in the right place. Second, God relies upon his habit of obedience by giving him a direct command — and no time to think about it. Finally, God relies upon Peter's good habit of doing the thing at hand which needs doing.

So we may ask ourselves:

- ✚ First and foremost — do we have the habit of obedience?
- ✚ Are we fussy about our location, or do we go where he sends us? Even if that's not the most comfortable place on the block?
- ✚ Are we in the habit of doing the good things at hand? Or are we in the habit of waiting until all things are perfect and then moving?
- ✚ Finally — are we listening in prayer?

First Contact - Acts 10:24-48

In an unusual bit of news the National Geographic Society has conducted a political poll (contact the Naval Observatory; sun to rise in the west tomorrow morning) and discovered³⁰ that the American people think that Barak Obama would do a better job of handling an alien invasion than Mitt Romney. That's "alien" as in "extraterrestrial." I will leave to the politically astute to explain why this undoubtedly makes Mister Obama the candidate of choice in the upcoming election. But it serves as a good parallel for today's lesson; the only real difference is that here Peter is invading the aliens, rather than the other way around. Here's the story:

Acts 10:24-48 NASB On the following day he entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them and had called together his relatives and close friends. (25) When Peter entered, Cornelius met him, and fell at his feet and worshiped *him*. (26) But Peter raised him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am *just* a man." (27) As he talked with him, he entered and *found many people assembled. (28) And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and *yet* God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean. (29) "That is why I came without even raising any objection when I was sent for. So I ask for what reason you have sent for me." (30) Cornelius said, "Four days ago to this hour, I was praying in my house during the ninth hour; and behold, a man stood before me in shining garments, (31) and he *said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. (32) 'Therefore send to Joppa and invite Simon, who is also called Peter, to come to you; he is staying at the house of Simon *the* tanner by the sea.' (33) "So I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. Now then, we are all here present before God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord." (34) Opening his mouth, Peter said: "I most certainly understand *now* that God is not one to show partiality, (35) but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him. (36) "The word which He sent to the sons of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all)-- (37) you yourselves know the thing which took place throughout all Judea, starting from Galilee, after the baptism which John proclaimed. (38) "*You know of* Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and *how* He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. (39) "We are witnesses of all the things He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They also put Him to death by hanging , Peter explains that Jesus is Lord of all. You may take us two ways. One focuses on the fact that he is Lord; Him on a cross. (40) "God raised Him up on the third day and granted that He become visible, (41) not to all the people, but to witnesses who were chosen beforehand by God, *that is*, to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. (42) "And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead. (43) "Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins." (44) While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. (45) All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. (46) For

³⁰ See <http://newswatch.nationalgeographic.com/2012/06/28/obama-vs-romney-who-would-handle-an-alien-invasion-better/>.

they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, (47) "Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we *did*, can he?" (48) And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay on for a few days.

No Favorites

My wife has a theory about grandchildren. Whenever she has asked which one is your favorite, she'll tell you that it's always the one who is on her lap at the moment. As of this writing, we have three favorite grandchildren. God, it seems, has much the same philosophy about the human race.

God-No Favorites

Perhaps there is no stronger feeling in the human race than this: the world is divided into "them" and "us." Human beings are storytellers; a good story requires conflict. Much of human conflict involves "them." So it's not surprising that Peter has grown up accepting this as part of the normal universe. But now he gets a different message; God plays no favorites. It's an interesting fact about the Scriptures that much of what is obvious to human beings is omitted from the Bible. Most of arithmetic is covered elsewhere. God uses revelation to tell us that which we would not ordinarily discover by ourselves. The radical political message of God is the brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God — and this is its day of first contact. Until this episode Peter would've told you that only the Jews were favored by God. But by direct revelation God has told him the truth. It's interesting to see the criteria by which God accepts human beings, particularly those outside his fellowship:

- ✚ First, God accepts the righteous. It is a universal fact that mankind recognizes the existence of right and wrong. Some of us pursue what is right; some pursue what is wrong but seems profitable. It is not difficult to determine which of the two God prefers.
- ✚ He accepts those who fear him. It is one thing to recognize righteousness; it is entirely another to recognize the God of righteousness and realized that he will act in your life — whether for blessing or for cursing. It is still true that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Barriers

The construction of "us" and "them" is so firmly entrenched in the human race largely because of the way we view each other. There are a number of barriers to the unity of the church, in this regard. You might consider these:

- ✚ History — as in, "we've always done it this way." In the church this includes the establishment of any number of denominations and sects as well as the formalities of worship. The major divisions of Christendom are fairly obvious to us all; we forget sometimes that they started out as minor points of debate.
- ✚ Social class — although we like to deny this one in America, it is fairly obvious that this is a barrier to the unity of the church. What might interest you is this thought: it's not just the top social class that has the problem. If you are running a motorcycle church, just how welcome does the little old lady from Pasadena feel?
- ✚ Ethnic and language difficulties are also prominent.

Barrier Busting People

The existence of such barriers in the church is so common that many "church growth" experts simply taken for granted and say that we have to work around them. But as Peter shows us here, we can break down these barriers. We need to know what kind of people we need to be if this is going to happen. May I suggest the following attributes?

- ✚ If you're going to break down barriers, you need to be humble — but not wishy-washy. A change of this magnitude is something which is not for the faint hearted. Peter is not a particularly wishy-washy person, but the revelation of God has put him into a humble state which allows him to break down such a barrier.
- ✚ Such a person should also be rather unconventional, but obedient. That you need to be unconventional is fairly obvious; but it doesn't help to be a rebel without a cause. If you want to do good things, it usually helps to know what you are doing. If you are doing things in the church, you need to be obedient to God.
- ✚ Of course, God honors those whose character is a living praise of him. Simply put, such a person should be a man of prayer, and also of good works.

If such a person rises to prominence, he is often called a Saint. To cite the most obvious example, aren't these the characteristics you would want to have in a foreign missionary?

The Message That Unites

Peter, in this instance, is faced with the challenge of preaching his first sermon to a bunch of people who are not Jews. It's not the kind of thing that you can practice very well. In fact, the entire situation is quite new. But it seems that Peter produces the same message for the Gentile as for the Jew — but with some variations suited to the difference in knowledge.

Jesus, the Christ

The central message of Christianity is Jesus, the Christ, himself. Every other religion in the world essentially has the same message: I, the prophet (or guru), have received a message for you. Christ tells you that he is the message. Here's what Peter says about him:

- ✚ First, Jesus of Nazareth is the Word which God sent to the world. The ultimate message of God to mankind is not a series of pages written in Greek, but the divine man himself, Jesus of Nazareth.
- ✚ Next, Peter tells us that Jesus is Lord of all. You may take this in two ways. First, it means that Jesus is Lord — the rightful ruler over all things in the universe. That is the proper focus on his power and authority. But you also may understand it as being Lord of *all*. He is not just God for the Jews or the people in Western Europe— but for all people.
- ✚ Peter gives us than a brief life history of the ministry of Jesus here on Earth.
- ✚ Finally, Peter tells us that Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, is returning to judge the living and the dead. Just as he is Lord of all, he will be judge of all.

Death, Burial and Resurrection

Peter tells us here the central message of Christ: his death, his burial and his resurrection. Look at it this way: every other religion tells you that the guru has a message. That intrinsically limits your ability to investigate whether or not that message is true or false. For example, how do you know that Joseph Smith saw those golden plates with Egyptian hieroglyphs on them as displayed by the angel? This is a particularly important question since an identical series of hieroglyphs have been found in a book

which was in the Rochester Public Library at the time Smith was living in Rochester. It's even more interesting in that when Smith's hieroglyphs first appeared, the Rosetta Stone had yet to be discovered. Since then, we know how to translate hieroglyphs. Smith's translation of those hieroglyphs is greatly at variance with what Egyptologists would consider the correct translation. That's rather unusual in world religions; usually there is no ability what ever to test whether or not the guru actually saw what he says he saw.

But the core fact of Christianity is the resurrection. Peter here makes the assertion — which to this particular audience was simply a review of the facts as they knew them — the Christ was crucified on a cross. He died and was buried, and God raised him up on the third day. That is an extraordinary assertion. It's either true, or it's not. We need not get into apologetics too far to recognize this fact. I submit to you that, as a test, you can learn a great deal about the church's beliefs and the strength of faith they have by how often they proclaim the death, burial and resurrection of Christ.

Witnesses

To buttress his argument, Peter cites three witnesses:

- ✚ First, he goes into some detail about the prophets of the Old Testament. It is the contention of Christianity that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah of the Jews, in his first advent. His first coming is prophesied in the Old Testament, and Peter makes it clear that these prophecies are evidence of the truth of Christ.
- ✚ Next, he cites the then living witnesses of the apostles and other disciples. It is interesting to note that despite all the death and torture applied to the original apostles, not one of them ever announced that Christianity was some sort of a fake. Of the 12 apostles, 11 died gruesome, horrible deaths — which they could have avoided simply by announcing that the whole thing was a fake concocted by these apostles.
- ✚ Finally, Peter cites to them the evidence of the Holy Spirit. We might make this argument today more along these lines: if something is evil, evil comes from it. We see this in some of the televangelists today. If they're in it just for the money, you eventually see a lifestyle of gaudy consumption. A fruitful comparison may be made with Billy Graham, who was a salaried employee throughout his career. Well paid? Yes he was. But no one ever thought him to be a gaudy consumer. So if from evil you get evil, what is the fruit of the Holy Spirit? And do you see it in the Christians around you? If you do, there's something to it.

What Does God Require of Us?

So what does it take to be a man who can make these kinds of changes in the church?

Ready Defense

We should note that Peter was not specifically prepared to talk to this audience. He did not have a scroll in his back pocket marked, "open in case of Gentiles." But he was prepared. He used the same message that he used for Jewish audiences, with a different emphasis on certain parts.

One thing we should note: if you're going to have a ready defense of the faith, you need to be prepared before hand. Many Christians rely on the idea that the Holy Spirit will give you the words necessary for your testimony in all occasions. There is a difference, however, between the fact that the Holy Spirit will help you select the right words and the possibility that he will suddenly insert into your

mind the preparation you should have been making before. We are told we need to have a ready defense of the faith. To this God will add the help of the Holy Spirit — but we have to do our part first.

Accepting Lordship

It is not sufficient for the Christian to be honest; he must also be believable. The only known way to do this is to have a consistent walk in Christ. You do this by accepting his Lordship in your life and committing yourself to him. (I apologize to the experienced reader for restating what is blisteringly obvious.) If you do not walk the talk you will talk in vain.

The second reason for accepting the Lordship of Christ is that you're going to be placed in uncomfortable situations with uncomfortable people. Most of us are the same general opinion: if you give us the choice, we will sit on the couch and watch TV. We have to be told to get up off our rear ends and get moving. That's not going to happen unless you accept the Lordship of Christ.

So, just how does one determine that our Lord has given you the command to get up off your rear end and do something? I recently had the experience of someone asking me how you know when you have been called to something. Roughly speaking, here's what I told him:

- ✚ You listen for the call. In some way, God is going to speak to you directly if he is going to give you a call. This has happened to me precisely once in my life.
- ✚ You watch for God to open the door in front of you. Often enough, you suddenly discover something that was completely impossible for you has opened up — and God is beckoning you to walk through the door. The key to knowing that it is God's purpose, not your own, is that it's something you were sure just couldn't be done.

Courage

We have saved the most difficult point until last. There are many things which human beings fear; looking like a complete idiot is near the top of the list. We sometimes do not follow the call of God because we cannot have the courage to do so. But it is something we must have; for courage is the foundation of all virtue. Pontius Pilate was a merciful man — until it got risky. If you're going to step through God's open door, it will require courage.

That last sentence started with the word, "if." It sounds as if you're going to have a choice about whether or not you wish to develop the courage to be a living Christian. But you don't. Our Lord has made it quite clear that if you live the Christian life, you will face persecution. If the world hated him, the world will hate you. So you're going to need the courage whether you want it or not. You might as well get started on practicing the courage of the Christian.

Dispute - Acts 11:1-18; Acts 15:5-20

The reader will note that we include two passages in this lesson. Both of these passages have to do with the dispute over whether or not the Gentiles must become Jews before becoming Christians. Our purpose in putting these two together is to examine the way in which disputes were handled in the early church, in particular those disputes when Peter was involved. The narrative in the Scriptures is somewhat long, and I do ask your indulgence therein.

Acts 11:1-18 NASB Now the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. (2) And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him, (3) saying, "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them." (4) But Peter began *speaking* and *proceeded* to explain to them in orderly sequence, saying, (5) "I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, an object coming down like a great sheet lowered by four corners from the sky; and it came right down to me, (6) and when I had fixed my gaze on it and was observing it I saw the four-footed animals of the earth and the wild beasts and the crawling creatures and the birds of the air. (7) "I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' (8) "But I said, 'By no means, Lord, for nothing unholy or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' (9) "But a voice from heaven answered a second time, 'What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.' (10) "This happened three times, and everything was drawn back up into the sky. (11) "And behold, at that moment three men appeared at the house in which we were *staying*, having been sent to me from Caesarea. (12) "The Spirit told me to go with them without misgivings. These six brethren also went with me and we entered the man's house. (13) "And he reported to us how he had seen the angel standing in his house, and saying, 'Send to Joppa and have Simon, who is also called Peter, brought here; (14) and he will speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' (15) "And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as *He did* upon us at the beginning. (16) "And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, '**John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.**' (17) "Therefore if God gave to them the same gift as *He gave* to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" (18) When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, "Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance *that leads* to life."

The two passages are separated by some period of time, probably at least a year.

Acts 15:5-20 NASB But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses." (6) The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. (7) After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. (8) "And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; (9) and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. (10) "Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? (11) "But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are." (12) All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. (13) After they had

stopped speaking, James answered, saying, "Brethren, listen to me. (14) "Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. (15) "With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written, (16) 'AFTER THESE THINGS I will return, AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN, AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS, AND I WILL RESTORE IT, (17) SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,' (18) SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM LONG AGO. (19) "Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, (20) but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood.

The Character of Dispute

It is necessary for us to understand what it means to dispute something in the church. In particular, we must distinguish dispute and Christian discipline.

Dispute Is Optional

It is absolutely certain that disputes will arise in the church. It is also certain that the reader usually has the option of whether or not to join in the dispute. It does not appear so from this passage, but it behooves us to know this so that we do not immediately leap into every possible dispute. You may well ask, why shouldn't I get into any dispute which comes along?

- ✚ One reason is that you may be disputing with the weaker brother. If you will examine the Romans chapter 14 you will find clearly stated the doctrine which teaches that we should not attack the weaker brother's faith even though we are certain that he is wrong. Paul uses the example of a Christian who thinks he can only eat vegetables; evidently he was familiar with vegetarian Christians. Rather than try to enlighten this brother, we should in fact encourage him to eat only vegetables so that his faith is not attacked. You don't want to convince him to eat steak and at the same time destroy his faith in Christ.
- ✚ A second reason dispute is optional is simply this: "why not rather be wronged?"³¹ Paul specifically references the case where one Christian takes another one to court — to the public disgrace of the church. Sometimes it is better for the body as a whole that we simply ignore an offense rather than begin a dispute.
- ✚ We are also commanded to "prefer one another in honor."³² If the dispute potentially involves the question of which of the two of us is more important, higher in rank, or (heaven forefend) more pious then we should not be disputing it at all. The one who is the greatest of all is the servant of all.³³

Members of the Body

Americans in particular tend to view themselves as rugged individualists. It's our default view of each other. The church, on the other hand, is one body. This carries some implications for dispute as well:

³¹ 1st Corinthians 6:1-7

³² Romans 12:10

³³ Mark 9:33-35

- ✚ First, we must ask ourselves whether or not this dispute is something which belongs to our particular function in the body. You might see this as being something which only the eldership of the church should discuss; think how irritating it is to be an elder and have someone crash the meeting when in fact it's not their function. It works the other way too; if the discussion concerns how many diapers we need stocked in the nursery you should be able to leave the elders out of it.
- ✚ Next, are we picking up a dispute in the spirit which says that we are caring for the body of Christ — or caring for ourselves? If the dispute tends to tear the body apart that's a warning that this dispute may be best left unopened.
- ✚ A question which is always worthy of asking: are we speaking the truth in love?³⁴ If you are not speaking the truth, but constructing a clever argument you should not be disputing anything. If you cannot say it in love then consider that you should not say it at all.

Distinct from Rebuke

This may seem to be a side point. We must distinguish dispute from rebuke. Dispute concerns itself with things which are not certain. A trivial example might be the color the wall should be painted. It requires a decision; it requires a discussion to reach that decision; it requires the right people have that discussion. But it's not sinful to paint it in the color the other guy selected.

Rebuke has these distinguishing characteristics:

- ✚ Rebuke involves sin. It is therefore something which is required, for sin cannot be left alone.
- ✚ If the process of Christian discipline continues far enough, rebuke might need to be made publicly. Dispute is usually best kept within the confines of the church.
- ✚ Ultimately, rebuke can result in the excommunication of someone from the church. This should be an exceedingly rare event, of course. Dispute, properly handled, should never produce such a result.

Unfortunately it often occurs that at least one side of a dispute thinks that it's rebuking the other. Hence the need for the distinction is clear.

Conduct in Discipline

Much of the instruction a father gives to his children concerns the matter of right conduct. It's a question of how to behave. When you tell a child to behave, that usually implies you have given him some standard of behavior. In this section we will attempt to lay out a standard of behavior which should be followed in conducting a dispute within the church.

Politeness

Courtesy is the lubricant of debate. It is particularly important for those who are in positions of authority to maintain courtesy at all times. You will notice Peter's conduct here; at no time does it seem that he is climbing up onto his position of great authority and laying down the law to one and all. In fact, he is not appearing as an authority but rather as a witness. He relates his experience and expects his audience to draw the proper conclusions from it.

There is one great blessing in this type of behavior. Peter has given his opponents an easy way out. He does not confront them with the choice of accepting or rejecting his authority as an apostle (or

³⁴ Ephesians 4:14-16

heaven forefend even as Pope); the focus is on what we should do, not on who Peter is. The choice given is not to do it Peter's way or the highway, but to do it God's way. There is a great deal of wisdom in this.

Brotherly Love

In any dispute you should always consider your words: do they wound your brother? Often enough we get caught up in the emotion of an argument, and you begin to feel that being right is more important than being charitable. But our Lord's command is that we love one another. Indeed, he tells us that this is the way the world will know we are his disciples. May I suggest to you then that you conduct your disputes as if Jesus Christ were bodily present and listening. He is most certainly listening — but sometimes we like to forget that fact.

If you think this is not a practical point, remember this: whatever you decide, that brother you are arguing with at the moment will be needed to implement the decision. If he leaves the room fuming with anger it is unlikely he will become a willing worker. A church united gets things done; a church divided gets more disputes.

Dispute in Private

For some reason the Los Angeles Times considers the internal affairs of any given church something to be exposed as newsworthy and often enough corrected by an editorial article. From their lofty perch the Times editorial board dispenses its vast wisdom to correct those poor Christians who pay more attention to Jesus Christ than the Los Angeles Times. This is one very good reason to conduct the disputes within the church in a private manner.

One particularly good reason for doing this is that people are much more willing to give you the facts — Joe Friday's "just the facts, ma'am" — if they know that what they say is not leaving the boundary of the church. If your church has a habit of having its disputes made public, people begin to think more about how this is going to look in the papers than whether or not it is really the truth.

This also has the advantage that it tends to eliminate grandstanding on the part of those involved. It's hard to play to the crowd when there is no crowd.

Use Logic and Facts

I must admit that in our time restricting oneself to logic and facts when disputing tends to get overwhelmed by those who appeal to cute slogans, political correctness, emotional appetites and personal attacks. That is, however, no reason for you to do things the wrong way. If you look at our examples in the Scripture you will see some consistent methods:

- ✚ Since this is a dispute in the church, things get tied back to the Scripture. If you don't have a scriptural foundation for what you are doing, then it had best be something which is relatively trivial (see "color of paint" argument above.)
- ✚ Facts are facts — even when they come from testimony. It's important to know, however, whether your fact is that someone feels very emotional about this issue, or that they have a point. One thing is always good procedure: let all the facts come out. You just might need them.

✚ Logic — try it, you'll like it. It worked in high school geometry; it just might work for you. The study of the art of logic may save you a great deal of trouble. It allows you to recognize poor logic when you hear it as well as good logic.

That last item is particularly important if you are dealing with the emerging church — postmodernism in the faith. These people play fast and loose with the facts of reality; but they're also well known for the misuse and abuse of logic. A patient and careful exposition of truth and logic is a tedious task, but sometimes it's the only way to get it right.

Objectives of Dispute

If you ask most people who engage in some sort of a dispute or debate within the church just what their objective was, the normal answer would be "victory." We like to win. And if victory is properly understood, that is what we should obtain as a result.

Peace in the Body

If you do nothing else during a dispute in the church, preserve the peace of the body. Minimize the anger that is felt; eliminate the resentment that so often occurs when a decision has to be made. Deliberately pursue the team spirit so necessary for an effective church. Remember that you do not have to seek perfection in everything.

If you want a really good example of this, take a look at a Little League baseball team. There are many ways to get the thing done, and even the coaches will disagree as to what might be the next move to produce victory. But all good coaches know that individual performance is enhanced by being on the team with a sound team spirit. Sometimes even the star player has to lay down a bunt for the team.

Lay the Lightest Burden

If you were to read on in the 15th chapter of Acts you would see that the church sent a letter to the Gentile Christians which laid upon them a very minimal burden. It often happens in church disputes that the people making the decision are not the people who wind up implementing it. The temptation exists, therefore, to lay a heavy burden on the others since you yourself won't be lifting it. This is unwise, as it usually causes a great resentment. Take care to see that you lay the lightest burden possible on those who must either change or do the work. It's a case of the Golden Rule. If you were on the other side you would want the least burden too.

My Way — His Way

Walk away from this lesson with one thing clearly in mind: you are seeking Christ's way, not your own way. It is commendable if your way is Christ's way. It often happens that this is not the case — not for you, nor for anyone else. May I leave you with these three lessons:

- ✚ Remember our imperfection. None of us is all-wise; none of us is all-knowing, but all of us will be held responsible. Consider that you may be wrong.
- ✚ Don't worry too much about getting exactly perfect answer. The Holy Spirit still indwells the church, and He will not long allow the church to remain in error.
- ✚ In all things, in all ways, always remember: "Thy will be done."

Comedy - Acts 12:1-19

The genesis of this lesson is a little unusual. When I reviewed our previous study on the book of Acts, I found a rather good study on the subject of intercession. It would seem appropriate to update this a bit, but I found myself copying more than updating. As a result we are taking a different tack. While the subject is entirely serious, it has its comic elements. Those elements will form the core of the lesson for this last episode in the life of Peter.

Acts 12:1-19 NASB Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church in order to mistreat them. (2) And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword. (3) When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Now it was during the days of Unleavened Bread. (4) When he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out before the people. (5) So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God. (6) On the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison. (7) And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter's side and woke him up, saying, "Get up quickly." And his chains fell off his hands. (8) And the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he *said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." (9) And he went out and continued to follow, and he did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. (10) When they had passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened for them by itself; and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel departed from him. (11) When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." (12) And when he realized *this*, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. (13) When he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant-girl named Rhoda came to answer. (14) When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her joy she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate. (15) They said to her, "You are out of your mind!" But she kept insisting that it was so. They kept saying, "It is his angel." (16) But Peter continued knocking; and when they had opened *the door*, they saw him and were amazed. (17) But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had led him out of the prison. And he said, "Report these things to James and the brethren." Then he left and went to another place. (18) Now when day came, there was no small disturbance among the soldiers *as to* what could have become of Peter. (19) When Herod had searched for him and had not found him, he examined the guards and ordered that they be led away *to execution*. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and was spending time there.

Asleep

Perhaps things were different in those days, but I suspect most of us would not sleep soundly the night before our execution. Peter, somehow, did.

Why the Last Day?

Concealed in this passage is the fact that Peter was probably in jail for about seven days. The expression, "days of Unleavened Bread", denotes a period of seven days in which the devout Jew did not eat bread with yeast in it. Herod evidently was waiting until this period was over to execute Peter. So God had seven days in which to rescue Peter from jail — and he picked the last one. Why?

- ✚ One reason would be to teach the church to pray without ceasing — and never give up. So many of us do not persist in prayer; it is a lesson that must be learned in each generation.
- ✚ Similarly, this long period would be something which would test — and therefore strengthen — Peter's faith.
- ✚ One reason which you might not guess at first: Peter is a man of action. He is now chained up and given plenty of opportunity to do something abnormal: think. The man of action is forced to become a man of contemplation. It's a step towards maturity.

Peter Can Sleep

I suppose that experts on the subject of getting to sleep would probably not recommend spending your night chained up, with a guard on either side of you, knowing that your head was going to be cut off the next morning. Herod, after all, had beheaded James just before this incident starts. Peter can't even roll over and sleep on his side. Why is it that Peter can sleep?

- ✚ Peter sleeps because he trusts the Lord — even in life or death situations.
- ✚ Peter can sleep because he has thought the matter through; to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.
- ✚ Peter can sleep because he knows the master of sea and sky, and has seen his power displayed.

The Angel's Conduct

Angels seem to be a funny species. Peter thinks he's dreaming, or seeing a vision, when the angel arrives. But we might note a couple of things about the angel's behavior which should have alerted Peter to the truth:

- ✚ The angel is in a hurry. You can picture him kicking Peter in the side and telling them to get up as if he was dealing with the lazy schoolboy.
- ✚ This is a very businesslike angel. He gets Peter out of jail, then out of the sight of the jail, and leaves. There is nothing dreamlike here. But Peter's state of mind is such that until the angel departs, he thinks he's having a vision. Some people are really hard to convince.

Rhoda

If you want to see the center of the comedy here, look at Rhoda. If we had to cast this as a play, I would want Lucille Ball playing the part of Rhoda.

Why Answer the Door?

If someone knocks on the door of my house in the middle of the night, we have to undo four different locks to get them access into the house. We don't live in a particularly violent or tough neighborhood; it's just the reasonable precautions of living in America in the 21st century. Things were quite a bit worse then. Opening the gate — or at least answering the knock — is not particularly normal behavior in the dark of night before the invention of the electric light bulb. There are scary things out

there that go bump in the dark. If you're going to answer the gate, you don't send a woman to do the job.

That's the normal state of affairs. In this instance, you would also have to consider the possibility that the knock at the gate with came from the authorities who were persecuting the church. A quick glance out of the top story window and hit the back door would be very useful.

So why did the servant girl answer the gate? I suspect it's because of the habit of hospitality. The household would be accustomed to receiving guests; Rhoda was probably doing something she had done a hundred times before.

Why Didn't She Open the Gate?

In every two-person comedy there are two players: the schlemiel and the schlemozzle. The schlemiel is the guy who is always spilling the soup. The schlemozzle is the guy the soup is spilled on. Peter is the schlemozzle.

In a sense, Rhoda's response was quite normal. She had good news; she was going to share it. If you remember the woman at the well in Samaria, her first reaction was to share the good news of Christ with her fellow Samaritans. Rhoda is doing much the same thing.

What makes it funny is that she leaves Peter at the gate, knocking. St. Francis had an interesting observation concerning such things. He was once asked what he would do if he was gardening and someone came up and told him that the Lord Jesus had returned. His reply simply was that he would finish his gardening, and then go see the Lord. It is important for the Christian to remember to do the task at hand, no matter what the state of our emotions might be.

"They" Opened the Gate

Apparently Rhoda had a reputation before this incident. The group of believers in the house evidently thinks that she's having a blonde moment. So they tell her she's nuts.

Then we see one of the most common — and often comic — reactions of human beings. They experienced the perils of, "it could be." Since they are quite convinced that Peter, in bodily form, is still in jail there is the question of just exactly who Rhoda heard at the gate. No good explanation presents itself, so some investigation must be made. But the answer could be something really spooky. So what we get is a vision: a crowd full of people, each telling the other, "You go first." Think of Don Knotts leading Tim Conway to the gate.

Believers Who Didn't Believe

One of the reasons that you are encouraged to read the Scriptures on a daily basis is so that you will see, regularly, the wonders and the glory of God. This is most necessary for our education. We would otherwise conclude that God had little interest in us, no interest at all in doing great things while we're around, and otherwise was generally boring. As these folks discover, none of this is true.

Just Been Praying For

Faith is not the same thing as magic. Some people approach their prayers with the idea that if they just chant the right formula God will give them what they want. That's an attempt at magic; that's not faith. Those who act in true faith know that it is not their incantation but the power of God which does the work. Perhaps as important, God does his work in his own way — usually ignoring or going counter to our own advice. One can imagine the church praying that Herod would be merciful towards Peter and not lock him up too long. God is open to our pleas; however, he does things his own way.

These people did not believe; they wanted, instead. We are often like that. We approach our prayers with the idea that God probably isn't going to do what we ask, but would be nice if he did. We really don't expect any results, though. We're like the kid and the Volkswagen commercial — you remember, the one wearing a Darth Vader costume. You remember the shock when he focuses his hands on the car — and it starts? You have an idea of how these people felt.³⁵

Invite Him In

If you accept the idea that they thought this was Peter's guardian angel, you would think they would invite him in. After all, Abraham entertained angels. On the other hand, angels are scary. Their first words are usually, "fear not." We usually make the assumption that the Christian life is supposed to be boring. Dullness is our usual fare. When something comes along that is not boring and dull in the matters of God, we are in unfamiliar territory and we act like it.

Did you notice that they're still astonished after they invite Peter in?

At the Wrong House

Peter, to his credit, does not get angry. Instead he tells his story in a simple and direct manner — probably glancing over his shoulder all the time, wondering when the local Gestapo will arrive. After all, it's not like he was greeted with stealth. He takes the reasonable precaution of asking them to tell the other apostles about his release; reasonable, because his presence might reveal where they are meeting. He then leaves for another location — and even years later, Luke, writing this account, isn't going to tell you where he went.

This is fitting. Peter does not presume upon the favor of God. He's been released jail, but that doesn't mean he can go out and strut that fact in front of the local authorities with impunity. Christ commanded him that when he was persecuted it was to flee to the next city. We don't know what that city was, but flee he did.

There's a lesson there for us. Indeed, the whole quality has one big lesson for us. That lesson is that we presume upon God far too much:

✚ We presume that he won't act. Even though we ask him in prayer to do something, we have this attitude that it's not likely to happen. That is not how he told us to pray.

³⁵ Currently can be seen at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R55e-uHQna0>

- ✦ We presume that because we are in the right, God will not allow anything evil to befall us. Yet he tells us, in this world we will have trouble.
- ✦ We presume that he will do what we ask in our own way. This underestimates the wisdom and power of the Almighty most quickly.

Epilogue

So ends our study of the life of Peter. If we had to pick one lesson from his life, it might be this: God will take the material we provided him and make greatness of it — if we will let him. Neither our past, nor our personality, nor our pride is a barrier to what God can do — if we will let him.