
Becoming a Commissional Church in adversity

– part one

Acts 6:8-9:31

Dan Turner

Introduction Today’s ministry was difficult to prepare for. Initially as I looked over my assignment and noticed the size of the message it intimidated me. And then as I read, reflected and began to write I saw something more than merely the size of the task. Ultimately the seriousness of this message intimidated me. What started as a daunting exercise in exegesis gave way to seeing the gravity of this reality. What helped me much was meeting with a newly baptized believer this week and listening to his fresh questions.

He asked me about Mark 8 and blindness. We began to read the account and found out that Jesus was saying something to Peter and his sight that needed to become clearer. Jesus in that passage essentially said that the mission of the church will resemble him. It will be ridiculed, beaten up and some in the church will be killed. Peter thought he had a better idea than Jesus’ plan. He rebuked Jesus for a mission that operates in adversity. And Jesus’ reply stunned Peter and it stunned me too. He said “*Get behind me Satan. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God but on the things of man* (Mk.8:33).

Thinking merely like a human being over the mission of the church is Satanic. To want the Christ and reject the cross / to want the Savior and not the suffering is tantamount to breaking rank and teaming up with the dark side. It is treasonous. It is deadly. It is something we need to watch out for as we think together over becoming a Commissional Church.

What we need is sight that is clear. And that clarity only comes from the risen & reigning Christ (Lk.24; Mk.8). Let’s pray.

Today, we will continue our study on *Becoming a Commissional Church*. This series, commenced January 4th, wants to make clear what *Becoming a Commissional Church* is all about. Pastors Russ, Chad and Devon have worked hard and successfully helped us to follow the unfolding redemptive story of the book of Acts. We want to continue following Luke’s writings as we today look at the 3rd and 4th panels of his book. As we do this, we will see and sense the environment of the Commissional Church.

Our conviction is that when the church sees herself as the church in Acts becoming commissional is unavoidable¹. To the degree that we are certain about the things we are taught in the book of Acts (cf. Luke1:1-4), Clearcreek Chapel grows and goes. It becomes more established (more biblical in exaltation and edification). It becomes more extensive (more biblical in evangelism). Your Elders believe that *when our identity is refocused by the Holy Scriptures our activity is refueled by the Holy Spirit*. Word and Spirit in the midst of community change our lives. Our values, our families, our activities, our church, our communities change to the degree that we believe this redemptive story in an obeying way.

And so, to review our mission as Clearcreek Chapel please read aloud with me the revised mission statement of our church.

¹ Cf. 2Corinthians 3:18 to notice the “beholding as a way of becoming” idea.

By God's Grace and through His Word
we will cultivate in the hearts of God's people
a passion for the supremacy
of the Lord Jesus Christ
magnified in love for Him
manifested in love for one another
and **multiplied** by love for the lost

Today we want to explore how this mission moves forward in the midst of adversity. As we look at the expansion of the church first to Judea and Samaria (this morning: 6:7-9:31) and then to the Gentiles (this evening: 9:32-12:24) we will notice what the enthroned Jesus Christ does in preserving and promoting his Commissioned Church. Recall that Jesus did say: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and **you will be my witnesses** in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (A.1:8). And later on in the unfolding story we hear a teacher of the law make this observation: "If this plan... is of man it will fail but if it is of God you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God" (A.5:38-39).

So as readers of the unfolding story we know that the purpose and outcome of the mission are unconquerable. It cannot be stopped. It will move forward and will succeed. But how? is the question for today.

My subject this morning can be seen in 9:31.

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

As a result of (notice the word "So") all that we will see in 6:7-9:30, the church enjoyed peace and was maturing and multiplying. The question in front of us today is how did this happen? How did the church expand into Judea and Samaria and move out to the ends of the earth?

The answer is found as we consider Jesus Christ. In chapter 7 we will see Him standing. In chapter 9 we will hear Him saying. From start to finish the enthroned Jesus Christ is central. He frames and fuels everything. It stands to reason, then, that our subject for this morning is **Jesus Christ and how he brings peace to the Church, promotes maturity within the Church and multiplies the Church.** We will notice how he does this as we turn back in our Bibles to Acts 6:8.

Bringing peace to the church and maturing and multiplying the church the enthroned Jesus Christ turns condemnation into commendation (chapter 7) and turns persecution into proclamation (chapters 8-9).

First, let's watch Him turn condemnation into commendation. This we see in a man named Stephen – 6:8-7:60

Turning condemnation into commendation²

6:8-7:60

We want to stare at Jesus Christ this morning. We do not want to take our eyes off Him as we watch him work condemnation into commendation. To notice this we first need to observe the situation of the passage.

Condemnation

The Situation

6:8-7:1

Here we see a man named Stephen being unjustly accused of a crime he did not commit. In chapter 6 we are made aware of his character and love for the local church. Let's listen to vv.11-14 as we hear how this case was brought to the Supreme Court of ancient Israel – the Sanhedrin.

“They secretly instigated men who said...And they stirred up the people...and brought him before the council, and they set up false witnesses...”

The setting for this scene is a kangaroo court – a sham in the name of justice.

Sanhedrin's Charge

(6:6-15)

Notice the charge. V.13 we read “they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law”.

So the charge was similar to the charges they brought up against Jesus. In Mark 14:57 we read “*And some stood up and bore false witness against [Jesus] saying ‘We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands and in three days I will build another not made with hands’.* And after this, they killed him. Before we see the first martyr of the Church brutally murdered, notice his defense; 7:1-50

Stephen's Defense

(7:1-50)

Stephen in an elaborate way preaches the redemptive/historical storyline of the Old Testament to answer their question found in 7:1 – “Are these things so”? 50 verses he takes up to answer biblically the charge that he unceasingly spoke against the Temple and the Law. He uses their own authority (i.e. the Old Testament) to show them that God is not confined to Israel. The Gospel has always had an expansive scope that stretches to the ends of the world.

Abraham

v.1-8

We see this in Abraham and v.4-5. “Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living. Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child”

Joseph

v.9-19

We see this in Joseph and v.9, 17. “And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him... But as the time of the promise drew

² “Condemnation to Commendation” language came from Dr. Tim Keller in one of his in house publication works.

near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt”

Moses

v.20-43

We see this with Moses and v.33. “Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.

Solomon

v.44-50

And finally we see how God was never thought to be confined to a place as we notice Solomon and v. 44, 47-50. “Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen. Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David, who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built a house for him. Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says, ‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?’

If you read the passage from which he quotes (Isa.66:1-2) you will hear God say that He is not confined to a place. His face He makes available without going to the Temple (look again at Isa.66:2)! All this talk on land and tent and house and Temple are to draw our attention to the future; a time when Someone will fulfill these earthly copies of the Original.

In other words, the charges set against Stephen are untrue. He is not against the Temple and Law. He is accurately interpreting them to demonstrate how someone can come close to and clean before God? The O.T. with its Temple and Law pointed to a greater reality. *Jesus is our temple and Jesus is our cleanness before God*. He was the replacement of the Temple and the fulfillment of the Law³. This type of interpretation and preaching is the gospel. And the gospel is understood by religious people as lawlessness and met with persecution.

Religious and spiritually dead people hate the gospel and will attempt to condemn those who love and love to speak the gospel. But in all their efforts not only are they failing to stop the gospel they are assisting in the promotion of the gospel (as we will soon see).

Following Stephen’s defense we see him in v.51-53 turn the tables and set forth a charge against the Sanhedrin.

Stephen’s Charge (7:51-53)

“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the com-

³ This language comes from John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, p.129)

ing of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

His point is clear. The religious leaders’ concern for the Law was vain because they were uncircumcised in their hearts. And as a result, v.53 tells us, they “did not keep it”. They could not keep the Law because they were uncircumcised (cf. Col.2:13). Their need was the new birth! They need the very Truth they are attempting to extinguish.

So how did they respond to Stephen’s charge? Picking up the story in 7:54 we read:

Their Verdict (7:54-8:1)

“Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.”

Commendation

This is a stunning scene. We peer into Jesus’ work and worth to notice him turning condemnation into commendation. The religious people condemned Stephen unjustly and Jesus commended him justly (i.e. Justification by faith alone). We witness the working of the gospel both on the unbelieving persecutors and the believing preacher.

Because Stephen full of the Holy Spirit sees Jesus as the Righteous One standing on his behalf, he can see his maligners and murderers through eyes of compassion. Stephen who is condemned by human court is received by the heavenly court. The case against him was won by the Righteous One who was His advocate standing up for him(1Jn.2:1; Heb.7:25). Stephen closes his eyes in pain and reopens them in paradise.

The enthroned Jesus Christ advances His Church as he turns condemnation into commendation. He does this through the gospel personally and powerfully applied to the believer who proclaims the gospel.

But I don’t see the mission moving forward. His preacher is dead and his message wasn’t believed. How does this mature and multiply the church?

Now watch him turn persecution into proclamation. This we see in two men; Philip and Saul. – 8:1-9:31

Turning persecution into proclamation

8:1-40-9:31

Setbacks, suffering, danger and death are not things we generally associate with success. But notice how Jesus Christ turns threats to the mission and works them together for the good of the mission. We see this strategy in both Saul and Philip.

General Pattern

8:1-4

Before we look specifically at these two people, look with me at the general pattern. In this passage Luke wants us to come away with an understanding of the general way King Jesus designs difficulties in the life of the Commissional Church. Verse one shows a cause and effect⁴.

1. Death led to more persecution
2. Persecution led to scattering of God's people
3. Scattering of His people led to preaching of His Word
4. Preaching of his word led to conversion of the lost

When we are trying to understand difficulties in our lives we must look at them through the lens of this passage. We need to remember that we live in the environment of the Commissional Church. And that environment is hostile to the gospel. And yet, paradoxically, we see oppositional activities against the church serving to promote Commissional activities of the church. Remember Jesus is enthroned over all. He designs and/or directs all evil to ultimately carry out His plan and purpose through the church (cf. Acts 2:23;4:27-28).

To see this play out specifically notice Saul and Philip.

A look at Saul

8:1-3;9:1-30

And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

After listening to the gospel

consider 26:14

Saul detested the gospel. He approved of the barbaric, bloody execution of Stephen. He left the scene committed to drag off both men and women who loved and loved to speak the gospel. And so, does this mean that Stephen's message and life were in vain? Did Stephen's short-lived gospel ministry prove to be a waist?

After listening to the gospel up close, do you think Saul was the same after this? In another place in Acts where Paul was recounting his conversion story we hear the enthroned Jesus confronting him prior to converting him saying, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads" (a goad was a traditional farming tool used to spur or guide oxen; a cattle prod of sorts).

⁴ This was pointed out to me by Dr. Keller.

Saul was prodded and pricked in conscience prior to conversion. Perhaps, as he heard the gospel preached and watched the gospel preserve the preacher in time of need, as he thought about the Old Testament in light of Stephen's interpretation, could it be that the "goads" were moving him to the conversion we witness in chapter nine? And after Paul's conversion we witness the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth. Stephen's life and message were not in vain! It was mightily used to move the Commissioned Church forward.

After believing the gospel

Notice Saul after he was made to believe the gospel. Watch him closely by following along starting at 9:17

Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; and taking food, he was strengthened. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." And all who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?" But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.

Much could be said here about how Jesus expands His church from Judea and Samaria to the Gentiles; from Jerusalem and the 12 to the ends of the earth and the Apostle Paul. We will see this unfolding in subsequent messages.

But suffice it to say that here we witness the enthroned Jesus turning a persecutor of the gospel into a proclaimer of the gospel. We see how Jesus Christ in heaven brings peace to the church, maturing the church and multiplying the church. He does so by turning persecution into proclamation. We see this in Paul's conversion. We see this also in Philip's persecution. Listen to v.4.

A look at Philip

8:4-40

Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ.

A joyful city

v.4-8

These designed difficulties were repositioning the Commissioned Church. Thrusting His people out of familiarity and placing them in the frontier, Jesus moves His church into a more strategic place. As the spotlight travels over many who were scattered and proclaiming the gospel, it lands upon one person whose name was Philip. He, like Stephen, performed miracles and proclaimed Christ. But unlike Stephen, there was a very positive response to his ministry. According to v.4-8 we see a whole city turned into joy through gospel ministry. The enthroned Jesus repositioned his people through persecution to preach the gospel compassionately and cou-

rageously. Many conversions are seen in this passage. But not every response was positive.

A false conversion

v.9-25

As we continue following the storyline of Acts we are to notice the power of the gospel. But we are also to notice the varied results of the proclamation of the gospel. For example, in chapter two we saw how the power of the gospel saved 3,000 people. But in chapter seven, we saw the power of the gospel saving 0. And here, we see the power of the gospel saving many but not without difficulty. Simon the magician demonstrates false profession of faith. The apostles Peter and John came down from Jerusalem to Samaria to investigate the extra special response of the people. They laid hands on them and cause them to receive the Spirit. Through this event the magician was exposed as a fraud to demonstrate that the results of the proclamation of the gospel vary.

And the spreading of the gospel

v.26-40

Luke rounds off his teaching on the expansion of the Word and church by giving two other vignettes about Philip's ministry, showing how the gospel was spreading; v.26-40.

In these three chapters we witness Spirit-filling, powerful preaching, perversion of justice, the face of an angel, tight reasoning from the O.T., enraged listeners, jeering crowd, bloody face, broken bones, people crying, smug approvals, homeless people, hopeful people, out breaking joy, false conversion, supernatural conversion, suspicion, confident preaching.

All of this and more empties out into 9:31 which says, "*So (as a result of all this) the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied*". And over and behind it all we see the enthroned Jesus Christ.

Conclusion How are we to reflect upon and respond to all this?

1. Jesus Christ is over and in the midst of all of life.
 - a. How do you view Jesus Christ and difficulty and danger? Is He the ruling and reigning King in your life when things go well? But when difficulty and danger set in does He stop ruling and reigning as King?
2. A vivid & vital experience of the gospel corresponds to the filling of the Spirit.
 - a. Do you sense the Person of Jesus and the power of His gospel when in need? Are you rehearsing the pure gospel to your own heart daily so as to see by faith your advocate; the righteous one?
3. Threats to the mission work together for the good of the mission.
 - a. Do you believe that He works all things together for good to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose? Do you find this truth helpful when you face relocation due to difficulties & new relationships because of hardships? Jesus Christ designing difficulties for you is for your progress (cf. Heb.12) and the promotion of His mission.
4. Maturing and multiplying the Church is the Christ-guided, Spirit-empowered, risk-taking mission
 - a. Are we becoming the Commissional Church? Do you see yourself in the pages of Scripture? Do you look for certainty from Christ in adversity rather than looking for security in adversity? Do you see ourselves moving more toward risk and difficulty as a result of seeing our identity in Scripture? Or are we risk-adverse and move the opposite direction toward safety, comfort, ease and predictability?

Clearcreek Chapel will continue becoming a commissional church as our identity is refocused by the Holy Scriptures and our activity is refueled by the Holy Spirit.

