

---

# Becoming a Commissional Church in adversity

## – part two

**Acts 9:32-12:24**

*Dan Turner*

**Introduction** But like we noticed this morning it was not just God’s people who promoted this. It was the enthroned Lord Jesus himself who advanced His mission through His church to reach the Gentiles. He is the One who repositions His people, who guides His people, who orchestrates encounters with His people and the lost so that they will hear gospel, believe in Him and thus be saved (cf. Acts 4:12).

Tonight’s subject is found at the fourth progress report. Acts 12:24 says:

*“But the word of God increased and multiplied”.*

That is to say, in spite of (notice the word “But”) all that we will see in 9:32-12:23, the word of God increased and multiplied. The question in front of us this evening is how did this happen? How did the gospel spread into Gentile territory, convert Gentiles and multiply churches? And this occurred in the context of all sorts of problems.

### **Tonight’s Message**

What we will notice this that *to cause the word of God to increase and multiply the enthroned Jesus Christ confirms Peter’s apostleship (9:32-43), corrects Peter’s thinking (10:1-11:18), creates a likeminded church (11:19-30) and cares for His people in persecution 12:1-23*). These things the enthroned Jesus does to cause His word to increase and multiply.

Let’s notice Jesus in action by first observing Him confirm Peter’s apostleship this in action as we turn in our Bibles to Acts 9:32ff.

### **Increasing & multiplying the gospel**

#### **By confirming Peter’s apostleship**

**9:32-43**

John Stott says in his commentary, “Both Paul and Peter had a key role to play in liberating the gospel from its Jewish clothing and opening the Kingdom of God to the Gentiles”. Luke, at this point in his writing, appears to highlight Peter as an apostle whose life and ministry God used to further the mission into Gentile territory. Perhaps Theophilus needed some confirmation about Peter so as to not think he had to choose Paul over against Peter.

Whatever the reason was in Luke’s mind, confirmation of Peter’s apostleship is in view. We can see this as we notice the plain parallels Peter has with Jesus. These two scenes parallel previous stories (Luke 7:11-17 and the widow’s son; 8:41-42 and a sick woman, 49-56 and Jairus’s dead daughter; see also 1 Kings 17:8-24 and Elijah with the widow of Zarephath). The point is what Jesus began to do and teach in his earthly ministry he continues to do and teach indirectly through his chosen instruments. And one of these instruments is Peter through whom the word spread. (see Luke 7:17; Acts 9:42)

## **In restoring the paralyzed**

**v.32-35**

The confirming of Peter's apostleship is first seen in v32-35 in restoring the paralyzed. We find Peter in v.32 going "here and there among all the saints". We can picture church communities and how the apostles cared for Christians. The clear theme of the book of Acts surfaces in his words, "Jesus Christ heals you" (v.34). The emphasis is on Jesus Christ and his power; not human effort.

These miracles of Christ's through his apostles have a striking effect upon the community. V.35 reflects gospel ministry and the conversion of the lost.

## **In raising the dead**

**v.36-43**

The confirming of Peter's apostleship is next seen in v.36-43 in raising the dead. A touching and tremendous scene is before us. A dear woman whose ministry touched many died. Tabitha was known and loved by the church. Peter was sent for and came. His actions look quite similar to that of Jesus and even Elijah. The prophetic power of the past continues in the present as we see the miracle of raising the dead. The results on the community reflect the previous scene. V.42 says, "And it became known throughout all Joppa and many believed in the Lord.

These two healing stories highlight supernatural power. They highlight sympathy toward the suffering. They underscore results of Christians caring for Christians. Unbelievers were coming to the faith.

Jesus continues to increase the word of God and multiply it by confirming Peter's apostleship. But we are not done with Peter yet. This next scene in 10:1-11:18 I think is the primary point of these first three scenes. I think this due to the structure of the passage.

## **By correcting Peter's thinking**

**10:1-11:18**

Notice 9:32-11:18 from a "triplet" viewpoint.

In v.33 we see "A *man named*...". Then in v.36 we see "*a disciple named*". And now in this passage we see in 10:1 "*a man named*". As with other triplets in the Bible, the accent falls on the third scene / point. One example of how Luke uses this convention is seen in Luke 15 and the three parables. The third parable (the prodigal sons) is the highlight and the point of the passage. (see also James 5:13-18)

When reading the passage with this cadence, the point seems plain. Throughout these last six chapters, we watch the enthroned Jesus Christ designing, directing and destroying obstacles to the mission.

The obstacle that threatens the mission in this scene is not found in Cornelius. It is not witnessed in persecutors of the church. It is found in the apostle Peter and his resistance to social contact with Gentiles. How Christ removes this obstacle to the mission is what this passage is about. Follow along with me as I read 10:1-16

## **Through revelation**

**v.1-16**

*1 At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, 2 a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms gener-*

ously to the people, and prayed continually to God. 3 About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, "Cornelius." 4 And he stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. 5 And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter. 6 He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea." 7 When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those who attended him, 8 and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa. 9 The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. 10 And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance 11 and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. 12 In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. 13 And there came a voice to him: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." 14 But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." 15 And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has made clean, do not call common." 16 This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.

We notice, as customary in the book of Acts, that God and not man is at work. Cornelius saw a vision and heard a voice. Peter saw a vision and heard the voice. He saw a vision of unclean animals of ALL KINDS and heard the accompanying voice bidding him to kill and eat. The message was clear: God has declared the Gentiles clean!

But Peter's thinking was not right. It needed to change before the gospel would spread to Gentiles. Three times the LORD gave Peter this message. Does the repetition suggest anything about Peter's persistent and prejudice thoughts? John Stott says regarding Gen.12 "by choosing and blessing the Jews he intended to bless all the families of the earth (see Gen.12:1-4)... The tragedy was that Israel twisted this doctrine of election into one of favoritism". (p.185)

To spread the word abroad and multiply church throughout the Gentile land, the LORD first works on removing obstacles within his own people.

### **Through repentance**

According to v.15, Gentiles must not be shut out of the kingdom. After the LORD's three hammer blows on Peter's thinking, Peter moves out in repentance and obedience. He went to the house of the Roman centurion Cornelius. And there he opened his mouth and said (picking up at v.34):

*"Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, 35 but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. 36 As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), 37 you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: 38 how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. 39 And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, 40 but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, 41 not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he*

*rose from the dead. 42 And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. 43 To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”*

We see that changing the mind and acts of obedience are required to discover the purpose of God’s revelation. If Jesus would not have removed the obstacle of prejudice Peter would not have socialized with Gentiles. And Peter would not have understood fully the purpose of the revelation. Revelation was given to understand the mission and pursue the mission. As Peter repented and moved out in acts of obedience Cornelius and friends come to faith and Peter participates in the mission of the Church

In light of Acts 1:8 and Pentecost, God clearly signals that the gospel will go into every culture and people group in the world. Magnifying His supreme worth by making a global multi-lingual and multi-cultural church is the mission of the enthroned Christ (cf. Rev. 5:9).

Now Peter was thus convinced that the Gentile mission was from God. He was fully persuaded that God has all nations in mind. There is no exclusive ethnic group that enjoys Jesus Christ privately. He is not a tribal god. He is the ruling and reigning King of the Universe whose mission honors His work and worth by saying “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation”. (Rev. 5:9).

This scene closes similarly to how it started. Not only did Peter have to be confronted with revelation and respond with repentance the Jerusalem church did too (11:1-18). Since Peter was recognized by all as a legitimate spokesman for God, his recounting of what happened at Cornelius’ house was enough to convince the Jewish believers.

The word of God increased and multiplied as the enthroned Christ changed the Jewish church’s mind from saying “the gospel is for our people” and persuaded them to say “the gospel is for all people”.

The thesis advanced in section four of Luke’s work could be summarized as saying: in spite of all that we see in 9:32-12:23, the word of God increased and multiplied. What is unfolding before us tonight is how that took (and takes) place. What we are witnessing is:

*to cause the word of God to increase and multiply the enthroned Jesus Christ confirms Peter’s apostleship (9:32-43), corrects Peter’s thinking (10:1-11:18). And now as we read on we see that He creates a likeminded church. This is spelled out in v. 19-30.*

### **By creating a likeminded church**

**11:19-30**

Chapter 11 concludes with the account of the birth of the church at Antioch. This creation of a new church reflects the birth of the Jerusalem church as seen in Acts 2. If we read this section we would find that Luke takes pains to make clear that there is no animosity between the two churches (as seen in financial aid to the Jerusalem church via Saul and Barnabas (27-30). The commissional church is unified regardless of culture or style. It is unified in the work of Christ on the cross and the worth of Christ enthroned.

To advance the word into the world notice Jesus’ strategy in multiplying churches.

### **Through evangelism**

**v.19-21**

First is evangelism – the preaching of the Lord Jesus. Starting in v.20 we read “*But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. 21 And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.*” To advance the word and multiply its effects Christ through His people plant a church by first evangelizing the people.

### **Through encouragement**

**v.22-23**

Notice now what takes place. The Church in Jerusalem heard the report of what Christ was doing at the third largest city in the Roman Empire; Antioch. They sent the man who loves to give encouragement over to this group to see whether or not this was of God. Barnabas arrives on the scene. He so enjoys grace that when he saw the effects of Jesus upon people he was glad. What does this gladden by grace leader do for these new believers? He exhorts / encourages them. This is the next phase if you will for the growth of this new church.

### **Through evangelism**

**v.24b**

Coming out of exhortation and encouragement these new believers had to tell others about the grace of God found in Jesus Christ. They were already evangelizing their community. And Christ was pleased to bless their efforts and bring into the church more new converts. This is an exciting ministry. And yet, Barnabas leaves temporarily. Where does he go? Why does he decide to depart?

### **Through education**

**v.25-30**

In v.25ff, we see Barnabas looking for one of the best teachers of the faith in the area. He went looking for and found Paul. Likely he viewed the ministry as larger than his set of skills and he needed help. He also knew that Commisional Church is teamwork. Paul and Barnabas go back to the new church plant and stay one year educating them through a training program of sorts. The great work of the enthroned Jesus Christ continues to increase and multiply as his leaders strategically plant churches through evangelism, encouragement and education.

### **By caring for His people in adversity**

**12:1-23**

Book four (panel #4), which began with peace in Judea and Samaria, now reaches an ironic climax with persecution in Jerusalem (12:1-23). This time rather than Saul, King Herod is the one persecuting the church. This persecution manifested first by executing James (12:1-2), then arrested Peter (v.3-19) and then dies out by God killing Herod (20-23).

The enthroned Lord Jesus is committed to His word as seen in Acts 1:8. He drives His mission forward increasing God’s word and multiplying its affects by caring for His people in adversity. We see this first in an unusual way.

### **Sustaining in adversity**

James dies a vicious death. Beheading with a sword is likely how he was executed. I understand that I am reading a bit into this scene (cf. Heb.11 for scriptural pattern and support). But as I reflect upon the last brutal murder of one of Christ’s leaders

(Stephen filled with the Spirit and his angelic face), I'm reminded of how precious and powerful Christ's presence truly is. In 1 Peter 4 we get a glimpse of how Jesus sustains his people in adversity. When much suffering occurs His people sense an inner strength (even a rare joy) because in the midst of the adversity "the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon [them]". They will not recant their faith even if a dull sword is sawing their head off. The reason is supernatural. Fresh grace is sustaining them in the midst of death.

So we see that sometimes Jesus will sustain His people in awful adversity. And other times he will save them out of adversity as we see Him doing with Peter in v3-17.

### **Saving from adversity**

**v.3-17**

Peter is miraculously delivered by an angel and with the help of the church praying. In v.5 we read "*So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church*".

This is the last we see of Peter in his evangelistic efforts. It is curious that Peter and Paul are seen as paralleling characters in Luke's writing. Here we see Peter caught and released. As we watch Paul in his later ministry and at the end of the book we see him apprehended but not released. Is Luke saying something to Theophilus about how he needs to take the gospel to the ends of the earth?

To move the mission forward Christ sustains his people in or saves them out of suffering. He also does something to the adversary. This we see as our passage for tonight ends.

### **Striking down the adversary**

**v.18-23**

In a most ghastly death, the persecutor goes down under the wrath of God. Herod is killed because he wanted to take glory for himself and not give glory to God. Jesus assures that his mission continues not only by sustaining his people in death, not only by saving his people out of death but also he strikes down the adversary unto death. Thus the word continues to increase and multiply.

What can we take away from our study tonight as we think together over becoming a missional church? (Recap the four points and tease out some implications for the people over each point).

## **Conclusion**

Think upon these six chapters we've traversed both this morning and this evening. Ponder much. Pray much. Discuss much in your respective Flocks. Our identity is to be shaped by the Holy Scriptures. As this occurs we will sense our activity stimulated and steered by the Holy Spirit. And as a result His work, together we will be becoming who we really are – *the Commisssional Church*.

Let's pray.