

James Philip Bible Readings

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THE BOOK of ACTS

The following Notes on the history book of the early Church are an expanded version of the original series that appeared in December 1960. The additional comments accompanying the original Notes reflect later pulpit studies and give a fuller exposition. These Notes appeared last in September 1969 to May 1970.

1) 1:1-3

This is a book, as its name suggests, full of action, the dynamic, purposive action of the Holy Spirit of God. The throbbing vitality and glorious spontaneity which characterise it should not blind us, however, to the very orderly and systematic development of its action, for it describes the ever-widening influence of the gospel beginning at Jerusalem, then Judea and Samaria, and to the uttermost part of the earth (1:8). It is, characteristically, an unfinished book, recording an unfinished story, one which has continued down the ages until now and will continue until God finally makes up the roll of His elect and establishes His everlasting kingdom.

The 'former treatise' referred to in 1 is the third gospel, and the writer of Acts is Luke, the beloved physician (see Luke 1:1-4). He refers to his first book, the gospel, as recording the beginning of Christ's works and words, implying that in Acts we have a continuation of them, and this is the truest understanding of the book. In this sense, it has been well named 'The Acts of the Holy Ghost, the Holy Spirit of Christ Himself, the promise of the Father. This is the true meaning of the gospel - not the recollection of a unique historical figure (although He was, of course, historical), but the realisation of a mighty, unseen Presence operating in all history, the ever-living Christ in the midst of His Church.

2) 1:1-3

The significance of the 'forty days' (3) lies in this realisation of the unseen Presence in the midst of the Church. It might be asked, 'Why did Christ not ascend to the Father's right hand immediately after He rose from the dead?' The answer is twofold: in the first place He had to open the disciples' understanding that they might understand the Scriptures concerning Himself (see Luke 24:27, 45) and the work He had accomplished on the cross and in the resurrection; and in the second place He gradually taught them during these days, by appearing in their midst and vanishing from their sight, to realise that His presence with them did not depend upon their seeing Him. They were being taught to believe He was with them independently of anything they might see or hear or feel, taught in fact to walk by faith. And that, even today, is an indispensable prelude to the freedom of the Spirit in the lives of believers. The importance of this twofold ministry of Jesus can be seen by considering the following:

The raising from the dead of Jairus' daughter, the widow of Nain's son, and Lazarus, though wonderful as evidences of our Lord's power, did not constitute a gospel. The raising of Jesus, however, did. And for this reason, His death was qualitatively different from theirs, as also was His resurrection. Furthermore, the disciples' joy at the news that He was risen from the dead was at first merely natural; for them it was simply a return to the status-quo, and it was not this that gave them a gospel to preach. They had to be taught the implications and significance of both His death and resurrection. Interpretation of these events was necessary; they needed a theology, a message. Only thus would they have a gospel to preach.

3) 1:4-8

The very partial comprehension of the disciples is underlined in the question they asked Jesus when He spoke to them of the coming of the Holy Spirit and how needful it was for them to receive the instruction He had been giving them. What He was referring to was the inauguration of a new era, the age of the Holy Spirit. It is true that the Spirit of God had been in the world before this time, as witness the history of the Old Testament, but it is also true to say that this was to be something quite new, and something which depended for its fulfilment upon Christ's atoning work and glorious victory. The promise (8) was an endowment of power, which would be their enabling for witness. The extent of this wonderful mandate was certainly grasped very slowly by these first disciples - long after Pentecost it seemed as if they were content to witness in Jerusalem alone, and the Spirit had to thrust them forth by means of persecution into the wider reaches of His sovereign purposes for them - but the rest of the book, as also the rest of Church history down to our time, is the unfolding and outworking of Christ's great commission to His disciples. True Christian witness always has a world vision, and only as the Church maintains a missionary passion will its vitality be conserved. A church that loses interest in missionary work will presently lose everything distinctively Christian also. It may have a name that it lives, but it will be dead.

4) 1:8

This famous verse requires careful attention. We should note the double association of ideas, first of all between the reception of power and the learning about the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection, and then between the enduement of power and witness. On the one hand, it is clear from Acts and the Epistles in general that the apostolic message which proved to be the power of God unto salvation was the message of Christ crucified and risen and of forgiveness through His Name. On the other hand, the apostles were to bear witness to that death and resurrection in the power of the Spirit, and it was for this that the power was bestowed. The task of witnessing was laid upon all who were gathered in the upper room (15), not the twelve only, and we may gather therefore from this that it is the responsibility of all who bear the name of Christ. Furthermore, witness is 'unto Me', that is, an objective testimony to Christ and His work on the cross. 'Tell them of Jesus, the mighty to save'. The sphere of witness was to be an ever-widening one - Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, the uttermost parts of the world, indicating the outward thrust of the work of the gospel - in fact, the book of the Acts develops on the basis of this verse. The quality of the witness is also implied in the word used. 'Witness' comes from the Anglo-saxon 'witan/wotan' - 'to know' (cf 'we wot not....' Exodus 32:1, and 'Moses wist not....', Exodus 34:29). A witness is one who knows, one for whom the good news is not only a doctrine but an experience. The word however in the Greek is 'martus', from which the English word 'martyr' comes; and a martyr is 'one who by his death bears witness to the truth'. Witness, in other words, needs a 'death' to make it effective, death to sin and self, taking up the cross. Without this, no witness can bear the blessing of God. It is said that the word 'blessing' derives from an old Anglo- Saxon word meaning 'blood'. The Son of man must be lifted up in witnesses' lives, and for this they must decrease, so that He may increase and be magnified. "Blessings abound where'er He reigns".

5) 1:8

The baptism of the Holy Ghost referred to here, is a subject about which it is easy to become very confused, and something must be said at this point to endeavour to clear certain misunderstandings that have arisen. The manner in which we apply these words of Jesus really depends on the nature of the answer we give to the question, 'Were the disciples at this point Christians, in the sense in which the Scriptures teach us to understand that word?' Well, when did they become Christians? Was it when Jesus said to them, 'Come ye after Me, and I will make you fishers of men'? Or was it when He appointed them to go forth and preach in His Name? Or was it after the Resurrection, when He said to them, 'Receive ye the Holy Ghost'? Or was it on the day of Pentecost, when the New Testament Church is regarded as having been born? One has only to put these questions to realise that there is a problem to be resolved here. But there is a sense in which it cannot be resolved; for there is an inevitable ambiguity that belongs to the situation of these early days, and to the very nature of the gospel. For the fact is that Christ came at a special point in history, once for all, and the events which are associated with that coming - viz. the call and appointment of the disciples and the institution of the Church of the New Testament - stand on the borderline between two dispensations, the old and the new. And the ambiguity is caused by this, that although necessarily Christ's appearance on earth, being historic, came at one point rather than another, yet that appearance has a timeless significance applying to all history. He is the lamb slain from the foundation of the world; His cross towers o'er the wrecks of time, and what He did in His atoning work applies to B.C. as well as A.C. How, this necessarily causes ambiguity in the situation. For example, from one point of view, it is absurd to speak of any possibility of men in the old economy having faith in Christ, because they lived and died before Christ was born into the world. Yet, from another point of view, it must surely be clear that, having faith in the Promised One, they were saved by faith just as we are. And the Christ in Whom they believed was surely operating in history before the Incarnation, for this is what believing in the doctrine of the Trinity means and implies. More on this in the next note.

6) 1:8

The command of Christ, therefore, to 'wait for the promise of the Father' (4) must necessarily be recognized as a historical command, and once-for-all, applicable to these disciples only, in that and because they were part of the historical process that was being worked out once-for-all. Thus it is misleading to take this command as having meaning for us in the sense that we also are to wait for the Spirit. At that point in history, the Holy Spirit could not yet be given, because Christ's work was not yet complete. At that point He still had to ascend to the Father and therefore these men could not possibly have the Spirit in the sense in which we now understand these words. And since we today are not in the position of standing on the threshold of a new dispensation as these men were, their experience cannot be taken as a norm relevant for us. And it is idle to try to decide whether they were true believers or not before the Spirit was given. There is no right answer to that question because it is not a right question to ask in the first place. The fact is, they both were and were not. They were true believers of the old dispensation, but they were not believers of the new, for the new was just about to dawn at Pentecost. Indeed the experience of the first disciples was not even regarded as normative for the later disciples of New Testament times. They did not wait for the promise of the Father after the days of Pentecost. The Spirit came upon them in their reception of the gospel. Definitive doctrine of the Spirit is to be found in the epistles of the New Testament, and there we find that the baptism of the Spirit, the reception of power, is the initiatory work of grace by which we are brought into Christ, and therefore into the kingdom of God (cf John 1:7, 1 Cor 12:13, Eph 1:4).

7) 1:8

If the foregoing reasoning in the last two Notes is valid, it will be clear that what Jesus is referring to here is the initiation of the New Covenant by which stony hearts are made into hearts of flesh (Jer 31:31, Ezek. 36:26), the covenant which He came to inaugurate and which is sealed in His blood. Therefore the true parallel which this affords to us lies in the reality of regeneration. In this connection it is significant to remember that whereas before Pentecost, the predominant note in the disciples' experience was joy and gladness that their beloved Master had come back to them from the dead after Pentecost, the predominant and prevailing reality is the power of the resurrection (cf Phil. 3:10, Eph 1:19,20). This is the power of which Jesus speaks to the disciples, and it is a power bestowed by Him on His disciples on the basis of His finished work in death and resurrection. The baptism of the Spirit is never apart from Christ, and never dissociated or separate from the work of the cross. This needs to be emphasised today. We are never entitled to speak or think of the age or dispensation of the Spirit in a way that neglects or dishonours the cross. The essential link between the Spirit and the work of Christ is central to New Testament teaching. Indeed, rightly considered, the coming of the Spirit is the culmination, the completion of Christ's work, incarnation, cross, resurrection, ascension, exaltation, and finally the Pentecostal effusion of the Spirit. It never stands in isolation, in vacuo, but belongs properly to Christ's work. Indeed, it is Christ's work, as John the Baptist pointed out, 'I baptise you with water, but He shall baptise you with the Holy Ghost and with fire'. The coming of the Spirit is to apply to the hearts of men and work in them what Christ has done for them. That this is how we are meant to interpret these words is clear from the New Testament itself (cf Rom 8:9, 1 Cor 3:16, 1 Cor 12:13, Eph 1:14).

8) 1:9-11

The significance of our Lord's Ascension is that He 'entered into heaven itself', to use the words of Heb 9:24, 'now to appear in the presence of God for us', to present on our behalf the merits of His atoning work before the throne of God (we may recall how in the Old Testament economy the high priest entered into the holiest of all to make sacrifice for the people, intercede for them, and come forth to bless them). But more, it was His enthronement and exaltation, His receiving of the Name that is above every name, His coronation as the mighty Victor. The Church's hymns on the Ascension are eloquent of this theme, and should be studied much in order to focus attention on this central truth of the gospel, that the Christ whom we worship is a glorious King, to whom all power is given in heaven and in earth. This event was, in fact, the basis of the ingathering of souls - He won the right to men's allegiance by His death and resurrection, and now the great capitulation was about to begin, as begin it did on the Day of Pentecost.

We must not, however, think of the Ascension of Christ as something separate, but simply as the culmination of the tremendous movement of eternity which is the goodness of God to man. It is the Incarnation, Life, Death, Resurrection and Ascension that constitutes the work of Christ - and never one aspect without the others. Indeed, we can go further and say that the promise of His coming (11) must likewise be included in the message of the gospel, as the preaching of the Apostles makes clear (Acts 10:42). In the truest sense, Christ's work was a finished work, in every aspect complete.

9) 1:12-14

We may be sure that the events of these forty days had brought much which, in spite of the patient teaching of our Lord, was perplexing and bewildering to the disciples. They must have only dimly comprehended the implications of Christ's resurrection and coming ascension for which He had been preparing them. It was all so new, and shattering to the conventional religious world they were used to. At the same time their bewilderment would be mixed with a growing sense that something tremendous was about to happen, something that would revolutionise their whole subsequent lives. Against this background, their resorting to prayer seems natural and inevitable and indeed an urgent necessity, for the throne of grace is the only adequate source of reassurance and enlightenment in perplexity, and the safest place when the might and power of God seems likely to be released upon men. How wise they were to wait upon God! This has a lesson for us today. To be sure, Pentecost was the inauguration of a new era, the age of the Spirit, and as such was unique and never to be repeated, but it is also true that all God's visitations and times of refreshing are new beginnings, and in this sense men have to wait for them. A careful study of the Scriptures should make it clear that revival cannot be promoted by men, and that when spiritual death has prevailed for decades, and then some signs of stirrings come to disturb a slumbering church, the wise course is not to rush into precipitate and (alas, often) frantic activity in the hope of making the most of the fleeting surge of interest, but to wait quietly upon God, until His purposes become clear and His leading plain. It is so easy to run ahead of God, in fleshly over-eagerness, and thereby do untold harm to His work. We have sometimes wondered whether there has not been some major misunderstandings of Divine strategy in postwar evangelism, and whether there might not have been a far more effectual spiritual impact upon both Church and nation if evangelistic effort had been less spectacular and ambitious, and more intent upon discerning God's purposes for our time. What if injudicious and untimely tapping of spiritual resources had released only a trickle, when the application of wiser and more discerning spiritual principles might have brought a flood of blessing?

10) 1:15-26

There are two points of particular interest that arise from this, the only incident that is recorded for us in the period between our Lord's ascension and the coming of the Spirit, a period of ten days. The first relates to the choice of the disciple to replace Judas Iscariot. Concerning this, two differing interpretations have been given. The first follows the straightforward reading of the passage, and takes the appointment of Matthias as the natural thing for the disciples to have done, to make up their number. It is clear of course that the number 12 was a significant one, and that the twelve apostles of the new age were meant to correspond to the twelve patriarchs of the old economy. According to this straightforward view, the conviction that led the apostles to proceed with this selection arose from our Lord's teaching during the forty days. Instruction may have been given, or at least implied, by Jesus, to the effect that a replacement for Judas must be sought and found. This is the view that Calvin, among others, takes, and he maintains that the disciples would not have dared to do anything that they did not know to be their duty and to have been commanded by God. Others, however, have suggested that we would rather have expected Jesus Himself, in the interim period between resurrection and ascension, to have appointed another Himself. Was there not opportunity to have done so, if He had so wished?

Significantly enough, it is impetuous Peter who makes the suggestion. What if this were simply another evidence of the trait in his character that had already caused so much trouble? The suggestion is that the new twelfth apostle was to be, not Matthias, but Saul of Tarsus, and that in the fulness of time our Lord Himself chose His man for the work of His kingdom. If this were so, then what we have here is evidence of how much the disciples needed the coming of the Spirit. Whether, however, this interpretation is valid or not, the very suggestion is a sufficient reminder to us of the danger of making human arrangement a substitute for Divine direction and appointment in the life of the Church and in spiritual experience.

11) 1:15-26

The other lesson this passage has for us concerns the question of Divine guidance and leading. The fact that 'lots' are never recorded as having been used again in the early Church after this makes it clear that the old order of things was about to pass away, and a new about to dawn, in which there would be a more sure way of knowing the Divine will. Jesus had said that the Spirit would guide men into all truth. In the era of the Spirit therefore, 'lots' are out because a heart indwelt by the Spirit of God has a new understanding and discernment (cf 1 John 2:20, 27). But the ways in which this indwelling Spirit does in fact guide and lead us, and make known to us the will of God, have often been misunderstood. To speak, for example, of the inward promptings of the Spirit is one thing. But what is sometimes forgotten is that the Holy Spirit is not the only spirit that prompts inwardly. There are the promptings of wishful thinking, for one thing, and the promptings of evil spirits for another. There is also such a thing as a morbid conscience, and this can often lead us into all sorts of wrong actions. John warns us that we must 'try the spirits, whether they be of God'. When we do, we begin to discern some broad, general principles which are of the greatest value in spiritual life. We shall instance some of these principles in the next note.

12) 1:15-26

We speak of the Spirit speaking to us - the voice of the Spirit. Well, this very terminology suggests something quite specific. The Spirit speaking means words, and the Spirit of God speaks through the Word of God. It is in the Scriptures that we hear His voice. It was a cardinal proposition of the Reformers - as it is of the Scriptures themselves - that the Spirit of God speaks in and through the Word, and that the two are never separate, in the sense that the Spirit never speaks contrary to the Scriptures. Consequently, we may safely assume that the Spirit will never guide us contrary to or against any revealed truth of Scripture. For the Scriptures themselves are written in words which the Holy Ghost supplies (1 Cor 2:13). The Scriptures also make it plain that the Word of God can come to us in the circumstances that surround our lives. In the prophets, for example, we recall how national crisis or disaster often constituted the Word of God to His people. This is just as true today. Thus, we have a threefold means - the Word of God, the voice of the Spirit, and the voice of circumstances - to guide us. And when these three coincide, we may be sure of God's leading in any particular situation. God's word, however, has to be opened and understood, and this implies the exercise of the mind. We are to understand what the will of the Lord is (Eph 5:17). We do not jettison our common-sense when we become believers; rather, it is sanctified and made serviceable for God. If we take seriously Paul's words in 1 Cor 6:17, 'He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit', we must recognise that the Divine ideal for man is for our hearts to be so possessed by the Spirit of God that we will think His thoughts after Him so naturally that His leading will become the most obvious thing in the world for us. This is what we see in Acts 15:22, 25, 28. Sanctified, divinely controlled and possessed common sense indeed!

13) 2:1-4

These four verses have a deep and central significance for the Church in every age, and we must study them long and well. They record the outpouring of the Holy Spirit of God upon the waiting disciples, and the birth, so to speak, of the New Testament Church. In this respect it was something unique, once for all and never to be repeated, the coming of the Spirit into the world to dwell among men as the gift of the Father and the Son Who, having been exalted, led captivity captive and gave gifts unto men. In the nature of the case this is something that could not be repeated because, having been given to the world, the Spirit is now ever in the world, and shall be until He is taken away at the last. But this is not all that is to be said about Pentecost. We have already (see Note on 1:8) spoken of the coming of the Spirit to apply the work of Christ experimentally to the hearts of the disciples; and in this sense what happened at Pentecost is something that can happen again and again, and repeat itself. There is such a thing as a personal Pentecost. Now, as has often been pointed out, there is something sovereign and mysterious in the Spirit's work of regeneration; it is within the Divine prerogative alone to bring men to the birth of Christ. Yet, from another point of view, this can be said: before the blessed chain beginning with death and moving through resurrection and ascension can begin to operate in a man's life, the 'false life' that has hitherto held sway within him must be brought down to death, brought to an end of itself. And in this sense, Calvary precedes Pentecost in the experience of the believer. In the spiritual life, as well as in the history of redemption, the Holy Ghost is not given until Jesus is first glorified (John 7:39).

14) 2:1-4

But we have not said everything yet that can be said about the mystery and glory of Pentecost. For, beside these other things, Pentecost was also something else - an outpouring of the Spirit of God in reviving, quickening blessing, a manifestation of power from on high, a time of refreshing, of the sort that had taken place before in the history of God's people, as for example in the time of Josiah, Ezra and others, and has from time to time taken place since, in the history of the Church - generally when the Church has lost itself, its witness and its message in a deadness and barrenness that has brought decay and moral declension to church and nation alike. And inasmuch as Pentecost meant a spirit of revival, it is not only something that can be repeated, but something that must be repeated, and urgently needs to be repeated today. The question arises: how can we promote a time of spiritual awakening like this, so essential to the wellbeing of the Church? The answer is: we cannot. Revival is God's sovereign gift to His Church; and we cannot earn it or bring it about by the fulfilment of conditions, since it is unconditional in its essence. Yet it is true to say that there are some necessary attitudes without which it certainly will not come. When God wills to quicken His people and His work He draws them to prayer for it. Luther once said, 'The prayers of the saints are the decrees of God beginning to work'. And although we cannot earn revival, we can hinder its coming through our neglect of prayer. This is the significance of the opening words of the chapter - 'all with one accord in one place'. It was to a united fellowship that the Spirit came: a unity of aim, the glory of God, a unity of interest, the things of God and the service of Christ; a unity of heart, a spirit of mutual love and trust among them; a unity of prayer, waiting upon God in simple faith. It is not too much to say that it was to these attitudes that our Lord's patient teaching during the forty days had brought them. They were ready for the Spirit's coming.

15) 2:1-4

There are several particular points we must note, all highly and richly symbolical. First of all, consider the significance of the actual day of Pentecost. It was the feast of harvest in the Jewish economy. The fields, Jesus had said earlier, were white unto harvest, and this was the day when the sheaves were gathered in to the garner of God. It was the day on which the Israelites were to remember that they had been bondmen in Egypt and had been led forth to freedom. And so many were led forth out of the prison house of sin that day, into the glorious liberty of the children of God!

Next, consider the symbolism of 'the mighty rushing wind', which reminds us of our Lord's words to Nicodemus, 'The wind bloweth where it listeth', and also of Genesis 1, where the 'breath' of God is spoken of as the life-giving agent. Here was an imparting of life indeed (cf Ezekiel. 37) where, in the vision of the valley of dry bones, the prophet was bidden prophesy to the wind to come and breathe on the slain that they might live. It can hardly be doubted that such symbolism would have been much in the consciousness of these early disciples; and the association of ideas would have been, for them, unmistakable and overpowering.

16) 2:1-4

It is very significant that the symbol of the Spirit's coming was 'tongues of fire'. We read that the Spirit gave the disciples utterance, and this is the great characteristic of the new age that had dawned. The tongues indicate that the chief means of communicating the gospel was to be preaching, and this is evidenced in the rest of the chapter. It was not the supernatural manifestations or the rushing mighty wind, but the preaching of the Word that brought salvation to the three thousand souls that day. Before Peter spoke there was wonder, amazement, even criticism, but it was his sermon that pricked their consciences and made them cry, 'What shall we do?' How slow the Church has been to recognize that the proclamation of the word of the Lord, rather than any number of alternative expedients, however brilliantly organized and executed, is the weapon that is mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds! As Samuel Chadwick once said, 'Sensational methods and startling advertisements are unnecessary to announce a fire: it announces itself... fire may always be relied upon to bring a crowd. It attracts all kinds of people'.

17) 2:1-4

The 'fire' symbolism indicates the nature of what Christ seeks to do for us and in us. It represents Divine energy working in grace towards men. And the qualities it suggests are cleansing and life-giving. Fire is a purifying agent. It separates the dross from the pure metal, and burns all the impurities out of our system, all the ugly things that mar our life and testimony. In the story of the fiery furnace in Daniel, we see how the flames burned the bonds of the three Hebrews committed to them, and the searing flame of the Holy Ghost burns the shackles of sin from off our lives, and sets us free. It certainly burned the cowardice out of Peter's heart when the love of God was shed abroad within him by the Holy Ghost. Fire also gives life and warmth. 'Fire lays hold of cold, dead matter, making it sparkle and blaze, and turning it into the likeness of its own leaping brightness'. The Spirit awakens life where death has reigned. Look at the ancient world! Something happened on the day of Pentecost which within a generation had touched its whole life and culture, transforming it, bringing new life and hope everywhere the gospel was heard.

18) 2:4

A word is necessary on the subject of 'speaking in tongues' before we go on from these opening verses. First, a real misunderstanding and misinterpretation, viz. the theory that 'speaking in tongues' is an infallible evidence of the fulness of the Spirit, a 'sine qua non' of the Spirit's full control in a man's life. Concerning this, two things may be said: (i) it is clear, from references in 1 Cor 12:3 that 'speaking in tongues' can in fact be an evidence of demon-possession as well as Spirit-possession. There were such cases in Corinth who were, in fact, cursing the name of Christ in an unknown tongue. (ii) It is simply not true on biblical evidence to insist that unless a man can speak in tongues he does not have the fulness of the Spirit. There is evidence in Acts itself that some believers were filled with the Spirit who did not speak in tongues, Stephen, for example, in Acts 6/7. Also 'tongues' are mentioned as one of the gifts of the Spirit, in 1. Cor 12:28, given to some rather than all. The real evidence of the baptism of the Spirit is a walk in the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit. Nevertheless, the abuse of a thing does not entitle us to dismiss the thing itself as irrelevant or a fraud, and the question still has to be asked what 'speaking in tongues' really is and signifies. This we shall discuss in the next note.

19) 2:4

We must not give 'tongues' an undue importance in our thinking about Pentecost. In fact, Peter, in his great sermon, does not even mention the subject. The gift was clearly given in the first instance as a means of communication - the strangers in Jerusalem heard the word of the gospel each in his own tongue. Was the gift then given for the disciples' future use in the dissemination of the gospel? This would be the obvious conclusion on the evidence of the day of Pentecost. But it is not so, and this is proved by two considerations. First, Peter did not preach in an unknown tongue, and second, it was not necessary for him to do so, for his hearers would certainly be bilingual. Therefore we can only conclude that the gift of tongues was given on this occasion as a sign from God, suitably to impress those who heard, and awe them into a preparedness to hear the gospel. Now, this is precisely the construction that Paul places on the phenomenon in 1 Cor 14:22 - a sign not for believers but for unbelievers. In this sense it was analogous to the 'signs and wonders' performed by Jesus to attest His claims to Messiahship in the gospels.

Some believe that this gift belonged to the 'once-for-all-ness' of the Christian revelation, and was therefore a transient phenomenon later withdrawn from the Church. This, however, is hotly disputed by those who claim to have the gift today. What are we to say to this? Well, look at how Paul deals with the question in 1 Cor 14. Whatever else we may say, it seems clear that he had reason to play down the question of tongues in the Corinthian Church, and for this reason: it was being coveted as an end in itself, as an experience out of relation to its purpose in the mind of God. It is significant that of all the churches in New Testament times, Corinth was the one most beset with problems and difficulties. Compare the spirit of that church as recorded in 1 Corinthians with that of the church in Acts 2, and observe the difference! The tragedy about Corinth was that in their preoccupation with the gift of tongues they had lost sight of the glory of Christ and the riches of the gospel, and therefore their 'tongues' were suspect.

20) 2:5-13

These verses reveal the perfection of God's strategy in the inauguration of the new age of grace. It was indeed, to use Paul's phrase, 'in the fulness of the time' that He poured forth the Spirit, for the feast of Pentecost had gathered pilgrims from all over the ancient world to Jerusalem during these days. Think of the potential value of that group as 'foreign missionaries' on returning home with the fire of the Spirit burning in them! There is no doubt that this was divinely arranged and planned, and there are numerous indications in later chapters of the same strategic working in the outward-reaching influence of the gospel. This enshrines an abiding principle which we ought to recognize and understand. While it is true that all souls are precious in God's sight, we must realize that there are some strategic places and groups whose conversion would be of untold value for its potential worth and influence on a wide range of people. When Paul was sent, for example, to Ephesus, that city became, by the very fact that it was a junction of many of the main roads of the Roman Empire, a veritable centre of influence touching most of the province of Asia with the message of the gospel. We should be more alive to strategic possibilities in the gospel than we often are. It is not merely a question of special groups receiving favoured treatment, for those who are thus singled out are laid under tremendous responsibility from which they might well shrink with misgiving and trembling. It is not a light thing to be called to strategic service in the kingdom of God!

21) 2:14-36

Peter's sermon, the first proclamation of the gospel in the new age, has a great deal to teach us. It is significant in that it reveals the pattern of sermon that the Holy Spirit inspires and uses in the service of the kingdom. It would have saved the Church endless confusion and barrenness if she had remained true to this pattern down her history. Even on a cursory reading it is clear that there is a twofold emphasis throughout - on the Scriptures, and on Christ. And it is not too much to say that these are the two primary and basic essentials in any sermon - it must be based on the Scriptures, and it must exalt Christ. By this we may judge the orthodoxy and integrity of preaching! It is also important in that it makes plain what the real message of the gospel is - and this is particularly needful for a day and generation which have been subjected to an almost incredible amount of erroneous thinking and teaching about the Church's message. The gospel of Christ is not, as so often we have been asked to believe, something that Jesus taught, viz, belief in the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, or an ethical system as unfolded in the Sermon on the Mount, or a way of life. To the New Testament writers, the gospel of Christ is good news concerning Christ - not what He taught, but what He wrought, in His life, death, resurrection and ascension, for us men and for our salvation, the mighty enterprise of God in Christ by which men are brought to a knowledge of forgiveness and newness of life in Him. In every sermon recorded in Acts this is the basic message given. And there is no other message that has any right to be called a gospel message, for there is none other Name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved!

22) 2:14-21

Notice how Peter introduces his subject: 'This is that....' What he says may well be divided into two parts under these two heads - 'that', spoken of by the prophet Joel, is fulfilled by 'this', demonstrated in their midst now. This extraordinary manifestation that had astonished and bewildered the whole city of Jerusalem was in fact the fulfilment of that ancient prophecy, a fulfilment God had promised for the last days of the dispensation, when the glad day of jubilee should come and God's salvation be made known to the ends of the earth. For Peter, and indeed for his hearers too, it was a matter of putting two and two together. This that had happened was not to be wondered at, or thought eccentric; it was something God had said He would do, and now He had done it, fulfilling His word. It was something that was always in the intention of God to do. And it was only because the presence of the Spirit has been an unknown thing in the life of Israel for so long that it was now thought madness. Peter's observations have relevance for us today. When a living gospel is proclaimed in the Churches, so many are suspicious of what they term 'religious excitement' or 'extremism'! But it is only because the Church has been so dead and spiritually adrift that this attitude can be taken. When men seek to put the life of the Church on a truly biblical pattern and footing, making preaching, worship and fellowship a truly scriptural reality, what will follow is predictable, not eccentric. What is spoken of in the Bible becomes a reality in the experience of the Church. It is a case of 'out of the Book into real life'.

23) 2:22-36

Having established the validity of the Joel prophecy, Peter now proceeds to assert that that prophecy's fulfilment was associated with the life, death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus - that the outpouring was associated with the coming of the Messiah of the prophetic Scriptures, and that 'this Jesus, whom I preach, is the Messiah'.

We should notice how contrary to the accepted view of history Peter's conception of Christ is. There is no thought here of Jesus being merely a great religious leader who was martyred for his ideals - a famous lost cause. True, Peter charges home the crucifixion of Jesus on the Jews as a whole but he says that behind this lay the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God. Christ's death was 'according to plan', the divine plan of redemption, foretold in the prophetic Scriptures, and prepared for and fulfilled in the fulness of the time in Christ. It is this apostolic interpretation of the history of Christ that constitutes the gospel. And it is interpretation according to the Scriptures - that is the important thing, and this is the point of the quotations from the Old Testament, showing that everything held together and was rooted in the divine revelation and purpose from the beginning.

24) 2:22-36

In Peter's proclamation of the resurrection in 24 he makes a statement, the understanding of which is central to any proper appreciation of the meaning of the gospels: 'It was not possible that he (Jesus) should be holden of it (death)'. A whole theology can be evolved from this statement. For one thing, it proclaims a unique Christ, for not to be held by death puts Him in a place of solitary grandeur apart from all other men; for death is otherwise universal, and holds all men in its grip. What does Peter mean by these words? Death, according to the Scriptures, is the wages of sin, and it entered the world by sin. It is the dark enemy of mankind, laying all men under tribute, reigning over them as king. The picture that emerges in the Scriptures, therefore, is of death as a dark overlord who has usurped authority in the world of men, making mankind 'enemy occupied territory'. It is to this situation that the gospel addresses itself. And the gospel is the Divine counter offensive against this dark overlord, God's determination that death should not have the last word in His creation. From the dawn of time (Gen 3:15), God promised that deliverance would come, through the coming of the King Himself, to make war on the enemy and establish His kingdom among men. And in the fulness of the time He came, incarnate as Man, to do battle as Man and for man against the bitter enemy, death. This is how the New Testament understands the gospel - as the Divine counter-offensive, the invasion of enemy-occupied territory, by the powers of light. More of this in the next note.

25) 2:22-36

The gospel record speaks of Christ as One utterly well pleasing to the Father because of His moral perfections - this is the quality that alone can qualify the Deliverer to accomplish His work. Only such a One can possibly do battle against sin and death, for death claims as a matter of course every sinner. But here is One, the only One, whom death cannot claim as of right, One - the only One - who does not need to die, and He enters the lists for us men and for our salvation. And He who did not need to die, whom death could not claim as of right, chose to die, and by so doing really carried the war into the enemy's stronghold, and this made Him a deadly and invincible foe for the king of terrors. It was as Lord that He entered into battle with death, and it was because he was Lord that He destroyed death from the inside. To use a simple illustration: if a current of normal voltage is passed into an electric bulb, the filament of the bulb 'captures' the power and holds it within itself, thus giving light. But if a current of infinitely great voltage is passed through it, it will shatter filament, bulb and all; it is not nearly strong enough to hold such a mighty current. So it was with death, which in normal circumstances was strong enough to hold all ordinary men but not this Man! He took death by storm, took it by the throat and strangled it, once for all and forever. This is what Peter meant.

26) 2:22-36

Two further points may be mentioned here. The first is that in making such extensive use of Old Testament quotation Peter anchors the gospel decisively in the Jewish Faith, rightly understood, and in the original. Divine revelation to the fathers (this is done likewise by the gospel writers themselves, cf Mark 1:1, 'The beginning of the gospel....as it is written in the prophets, Behold I send my messenger'). Secondly, in the references to David, Peter's point is that the words spoken of David in Ps 16:10 could not refer to David himself, for he did in fact die and was buried. They could refer therefore only to the Messianic King who was to come, and would be true only of Him. And David saw this in vision long ago. In so saying Peter once more asserts the continuity of the gospel with the whole Old Testament revelation. It is no new thing; he means to say, but something consonant with, and indeed flowing from, the Old Testament itself.

27) 2:37-40

We come now to the response Peter's hearers made to the preaching of the gospel. First of all, we need to notice something of fundamental importance for a true understanding of apostolic preaching, namely that from beginning to end Peter's sermon did not contain a single exhortation. It was proclamation in the truest sense of the word, the announcement of the good news of God concerning Christ, indicatives, not imperatives. The imperatives came after they had said, 'Men and brethren, what shall we do?' And it was the indicatives that brought about the conviction of sin in their hearts. This underlines the all-important truth that it is the gospel itself that contains convicting and converting power and we must therefore trust the gospel itself in the work of the gospel, and not our own more or less pressurised appeals and carefully contrived atmospheres to bring about conversions. Faith in the regenerating power of the Word is something we desperately need to recover in our time. So to preach the good news, so to announce it as good news, so to tell it out that men will have great and worthy views of the Saviour whom we proclaim that they will begin to ask what they must do to make that Saviour their own - this must be our aim.

28) 2:37-40

In answer to his hearers' anxious query, Peter summoned them to repentance. We should note from this that the gospel challenge is a moral one, not an emotional pressure. It was to their minds and consciences that Peter appealed, not their emotions, although their emotions were clearly stirred by the time he had finished preaching. Their minds had become convinced of the truth of what he had said, and it was this that awakened their consciences, and kindled their emotions. This is the true order, and when it is violated, when appeal is made to the emotions first and, alas, sometimes, solely, without any challenge to the minds of men and women, the effect can be quite disastrous. This is one reason why we need to be very careful about the use of music in Christian work, and indeed of many other 'supporting effects', however aesthetically desirable they may be, for the appeal in them is generally to the emotions rather than to the mind. And the same can be said about the 'wisdom of words' in preaching, especially if 'wisdom of words' means oratorical or dramatic effect likely to stir emotions rather than make men think urgently about eternal issues. Truly, the more we probe into the biblical principles underlying Christian work, the more we see the profound wisdom enshrined in them!

29) 2:41-47

These verses, describing the pattern of life and growth of the early Church, are deeply instructive, especially 42. These first disciples 'continued in the Apostles' doctrine....this is a significant phrase. Conversion, it is true, is a once-for-all experience, but not in the sense that, once it happens, it is over and done with. Rightly understood, it is a turning, a change of direction; but it is meaningless unless that change of direction is maintained. Continuance is the one indispensable necessity; we must follow on to know the Lord. And this is done in one way only, by continuing in the apostles' doctrine, and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. Now, we have the apostles' doctrine recorded, not in Acts, but in the epistles of the New Testament, written by Peter, James, John and Paul, and it is in these that we find all that is needful for the upbuilding and establishing of spiritual life. Since this is so, it is unwise to attempt to formulate doctrinal positions from statements made in Acts, which, after all, is a history book, not a theological compendium. Theological 'positions' were not at this early stage crystallised, and therefore definitive doctrine could not be evident in the record of the Church's action. It is the function of the epistles to establish this. This should be remembered when the attempt is made (as it sometimes is) to exalt the story of our Lord's life and teaching at the expense of the epistles, as if the latter were inferior in quality, and of lesser importance. The fallacy here is to assume that the epistles are speaking of something different from the 'simple gospel.' contained in the gospels. The truth however is that they are expounding the meaning and significance of the life and teaching, and above all, the death and resurrection of our Lord, and are integral to the whole understanding of the gospel itself. It is well for us to realise that the Church of Christ was never so vital or so vibrant with power as when she continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine unfolded in the epistles of the New Testament!

30) 2:41-47

One has only to think of some of the characteristic emphases in the apostles' writings to understand the thoroughness of the grounding these new converts received. In 1 Peter, for example, we have the living hope (1:3) the trial of faith (1:7), redemption by blood and regeneration by the word (1:18,23), desiring the sincere milk of the word (2:2), strangers and pilgrims (2:11), love (3:8), humility (5:5). In James, doers of the word (1:22), respect of persons (2:1), control of the tongue (3: 5, 6), friendship with the world, enmity with God (4:4), the prayer of faith (5:15). In John, God is light, walk in the light (1:5ff), God is love, walk in love (3:7ff). It is hardly surprising that new-born babes in Christ, nurtured on such food, should have blossomed into mature believers. Furthermore, continuing in the apostles' fellowship, they grew together, sharing a common life in the love of God, drinking at the same fountain of living waters. It is impossible not to be conscious of the note of joy that rang throughout their experience, as they shared and exulted in the reality of belonging to God and to one another in the glad communion of saints. Gladness, singleness of heart, praising God and having favour with all the people - what a glorious life it was! They were indeed a new humanity, breaking upon the despair and lostness of the ancient world and taking it by storm, awakening a yearning in men to taste this wonderful newness too. And they did.

31) 3:1-11

This story derives its importance from the fact that it is the first apostolic miracle. Luke speaks in 1:1 of all that Jesus began both to do and to teach. Here now is the continuation of His work through the apostles. There are several lessons for us to learn. In the first place, we are brought face to face with the reality of divine healing in the ministry of the Church. This is a question that is exercising the minds of many today, and it is asked whether we ought not to be stressing the gift of healing today far more than we do. Some general observations are called for here. We should note, for example, that the 'miraculous' is strangely limited in the Scriptures. We marvel not at the profusion of the miraculous, but at the restraint. Only four periods of biblical history are noted for miracles, the time of the Exodus, the declension in Elijah's day, the Exile, and the time of Christ, and birth of the Church. And these were special times, when the miraculous was the divine attestation on the witness of His servants, an attestation which God does not always give, or need to give. We recall what was said of John the Baptist, 'John did no miracle, but all that he spoke concerning Jesus was true'. It is a mistake to think that the absence of the miraculous is an evidence either of less spiritual power or of failure. One does not doubt the reality of healing miracles in our day, but the danger is that we should lose a sense of perspective, and assume too readily that it must always be God's will to heal. The logical outcome of such an assumption would be that death itself ought to be abolished, and the time for that is not yet. It would be a great mistake to imagine that failure and loss lay in not being healed. Some of the greatest blessings mankind has known have come through the ministry of great suffering and pain.

32) 3:1-11

The real tragedy of this picture, on the spiritual level, is not that of the lame man, but that of the Temple, with its gate Beautiful, its outward glory and splendour, but spiritually dead, with nothing to offer men in their need. The help that came that day came from the group despised and ostracised and opposed by the Temple. So often it has been so. God means His Church to be a light, a city set on an hill, but when she becomes preoccupied with outward form and ceremonial, and loses her way, as the Temple had in those days, and is in need of healing herself, God sometimes has to bypass her and raise up men from without to be the instruments of His saving Word. There is indeed a double tragedy in this: it is not merely that God has to go outside His Church to find those who will proclaim the message of salvation to the lost, but also that the Church should, in her crass blindness and sinful arrogance and pride, despise them for doing so. The Church today may be right in criticising 'splinter-groups' for their sectarian tendencies - and the latter are by no means faultless in their censorious attitudes and harsh judgments - but there is room for far more penitential humility on her part than she has yet shown, in face of the great betrayal of her commission to preach the word of God's salvation. It is not a light thing to have preached 'another gospel' so long to a generation that hungered in vain for the bread of life.

33) 3:1-11

We may legitimately 'spiritualise' the miracle - as indeed all New Testament miracles, since in the thought of the biblical writers there is not only a connection but also a resemblance between disease and sin, the one illustrating the other - and take it as depicting the crippling power of sin. Just as this man had been lame from his mother's womb, and cut off in the truest sense from all that could be called fulness of life, so man, made originally in the image of God, has through sin lost the power to live truly, and has become a caricature of what he was originally destined to be in the mind and intention of God. He has been reduced to a ruin, in which only faint traces and suggestions remain of a glory that has passed away. Like the unfortunate creature in the story, man in his sin has been reduced to begging for a living, and ekes out a precarious existence, stretching out yearning hands for something to assuage the longing and the frustration of a heart estranged from God. The rich young ruler is a case in point. Materially he had all that any man could wish for, but spiritually he was conscious that he had not entered into life. He was begging for a living, a poverty-stricken soul. The healing that the lame man experienced is likewise a parable of the blessing that comes to men in the message of the gospel. Wesley sings,

He breaks the power of cancelled sin
And sets the prisoner free.

This is the hope of mankind, and there is none so broken or crippled by sin that the power of Christ's great Name cannot bestow new life and open a door for the poor and needy into His unsearchable riches.

34) 3:1-11

The 'parabolic' nature of the miracle of healing may be further pursued. The lame man was 'outside' the Temple, a stranger to its service and spirit. What a picture this gives of humanity toiling, weary, suffering, crippled, at the gates of life - yet outside; so near to the kingdom of God, with only a step into life, for though in his sin man is far from God, He is not far from any one of us. But this man was helpless, immobile, unable to take that step; and this is the final tragedy of man the sinner: he is dead in trespasses and sins and unable to do anything to help himself. And the point of contact between the plight of the man and the power of God was the word of the apostles. It was this that constituted the 'bridge' of grace and led to his healing; and it is ever so in the spiritual realm also. The word of the gospel is with power. The word that hushed the winds and the waves, that rebuked evil spirits, that banished fevers, that opened the grave of Lazarus, says in the gospel, 'Rise up and walk', and power comes to men in the hearing of the Word. This is the most exciting and most thrilling thing in all the world. God forgive us that we do not expect the miracle to happen every time we preach.

35) 3:12

Peter expresses surprise that they should marvel at this miracle, and we would think that this was priceless of him in view of the unheard-of happening, if we did not remember that if it be true that God raised Jesus from the dead we need marvel at nothing. Anything - literally anything - can happen when resurrection power is let loose in the gospel. These men could hardly deny that something wonderful had happened - and was happening! - but there was doubt and incredulity in their hearts for all that. They were boggling at the fact of the supernatural before their eyes. They were, of course, Sadducees, the rationalists of their day, to whom religion was part of the general institution of things but never something life-shattering and transforming like this. And what Peter is in effect saying is 'Do not be sceptical: this that you see is not only understandable, but inevitable, on a right understanding of the Scriptures' (Indeed, on a wider scale, it makes sense of the universe, as nothing else can or will). And he proceeds, in the sermon that follows, to issue to them on these grounds an invitation to believe. It is clear then, that the Apostle's words in 6, 'Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have give I thee' have a wider application than to the healing of the lame man. Large numbers of halt and lame were healed that day (4:4).

36) 3:12-26

One is impressed once again by the scriptural-ness of Peter's message, and with the reasoned case he puts forward, as with the emphasis on the 'givenness' of the gospel. And, once again, as in ch. 2, it is on the basis of this - the indicatives - that he bases his challenge and summons to believe. First of all, the gospel is grounded in the Old Testament Scriptures (13); it is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who is at work in the redemption wrought in Christ. The gospel is not a new thing, but the fulfilment of the ancient promises. In 21 Peter speaks of 'the times of restitution of all things'. The word implies something that has gone wrong with the world, and tells of something that is to happen to put that wrong right. The 'something' is the tragedy of sin, that has affected not only man but the whole universe. And the story of the Bible is the story of the divine promise of redemption and restitution. This is why Abraham was called - in fulfilment of the promise made in Gen 3:15, and the whole Old Testament is the history of this promise of restitution (which is another name for salvation). And all the Old Testament recognised this about itself. Thus Moses (22) looked forward to the coming of a prophet, thus also Samuel, and all the prophets (24) foretold the good time coming, the days of the Prophet, Priest and King, Jesus Christ. This continuity between Old Testament history and his own day Peter establishes in two ways: on the one hand he states that they, his hearers, are the children of the prophets, and the inheritors of the promise made to Abraham; and on the other hand, he speaks of Jesus as God's servant (the word used is not the usual one for 'son', and is often translated 'servant'), and this is the Messianic word used in Isaiah of the servant of God. He, Jesus of Nazareth, is the promised Messiah.

37) 3:12-26

Peter's statement in 16 is worthy of close study. It was 'His name, through faith in His name' that made the man strong, he tells his hearers. There are two points to notice here: it is the name of Jesus that is the source of the power that heals, and it is faith in that name that is the means whereby that power touches men's lives. But in this case there is no mention of the man's faith at all. It was Peter, not he, who had faith in the name of Jesus, and this teaches a lesson of great importance in Christian work. We must have faith for those who do not, and perhaps cannot, have faith for themselves, and believe them into blessing and grace. Not otherwise will men be brought into the kingdom of God. This principle of vicarious faith is expressed perfectly in Mark 2:5, 'When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the sick of the palsy, Son, thy sins be forgiven thee'. This opens untold possibilities in the work of the gospel, for it means that no matter how hard and unresponsive and even opposed to Christ men may be, our faith may triumph over them and bring them to faith in Christ. How was Saul of Tarsus converted? Were there not prayers being made for him in the Church of God? There is a great challenge to prayer here. Jesus says, 'According to your faith be it unto you'.

38) 3:12-26

There are two further points of some importance to notice in Peter's words. The first, in Peter's appeal in 19, 20, is obscured in the A.V., but expressed more clearly in the R.S.V. Where the A.V. reads 'When the times of refreshing shall come.... and He shall send Jesus Christ', the R.S.V. has 'that times of refreshing may comeand that He may send Jesus Christ....' The idea that seems to be expressed is that the conversion of sinners, and especially of Jews, will accelerate the fulfilling and consummation of God's eternal purposes for the world. This is a note of urgency that is expressed also in Rom 11:25-27 by implication and explicitly in 2 Pet. 3:12 - 'hastening the coming of the day of God'. Is it not wonderful to think that by holy living and by the urgency of our gospel testimony we should be able to 'Speak a word of bringing the king back' (2 Sam 19:10)? If this has anything to say to us today it should be a call to prayer for the Jews, for their conversion will hasten the end of the old order of things and the ushering in of the new. As Paul puts it in Rom 11, 'What will the receiving of them be but life from the dead?'

39) 3:12-26

The other important point to note relates to Peter's summons to them to repent. If the story of the lame man's healing stands to what follows in the relation of 'text' to sermon (as so often our Lord's miracles in John seem to do, e.g. John 5, John 6) then the word spoken to the lame man (6) and the summons in 19 are parallel to one another, and have the same force. Looked at like this, something very significant emerges. To rise up and walk was precisely the one thing the lame man could not do, yet grace came to him in the word of command given by Peter and the impossible happened. In the parallel we should therefore expect the same kind of situation, and such in fact is the case. For to repent is not something that we can do of ourselves. Sin means not only guilt but bondage, and therefore by nature we not only do not want to repent, we are not able to repent. It is not always realised that if repentance was a human possibility, if we could come back to God ourselves, we would not need a Saviour. It is because we cannot, that Christ has come to seek and to save the lost, to give repentance to His people. And in the preaching of the gospel and the summons to repentance which it contains, power comes to men enabling them to do this impossible thing. We are summoned to turn, but it is He Who turns us. It is this that the blessing mentioned in 26 consists of - in turning away every one of you from his iniquities.

40) 4:1-12

The reaction of opposition which was aroused in the Sadducees was immediate, and is significant from two points of view. In the first place we must interpret it as the response of the powers of darkness to the outpouring of the Spirit of God at Pentecost. One of the most remarkable lessons we learn in Acts is the movement of thrust and counter-thrust that runs right through the book. Every fresh outpouring of the Spirit brought an angry counter-attack from the evil one, which in turn was made to serve God's sovereign purposes and bring glory to His Name. To read Acts with this in view is one of the most thrilling of experiences. God is a wonderful strategist! In the second place, the Sadducees were the rationalists of their day. They did not believe in the supernatural, theirs was a religion of ethics, no more, and anything that savoured of the miraculous or supernatural made them profoundly uncomfortable. Behind their opposition there was more than a little fear. The Sadducees are still with us today. There is a vast amount of unconscious rationalism in the Church of God. We pay lip-service to the supernatural events of Incarnation and Resurrection, but their real meaning is obscured and indeed denied by the way in which they are quietly relegated to distant history. The moment religion ceases to be merely a polite drawing-room topic of conversation, and breaks into men's lives in burning, re-vitalising power, it becomes a source of embarrassment and disturbance which some seem to find quite intolerable. It is so safe - and apparently fashionable - to speak about the Church and its multifarious activities, but when a man speaks of a personal experience of Christ and of what He has done for his soul, it is looked upon almost as a breach of etiquette, if not bad manners. It is the measure of the Church's infidelity that real, living religion embarrasses her so much and makes her so ill at ease!

41) 4:1-12

The following comment by Dr. James Denney on the nature of Sadduceeism is worth pondering: 'Religion for the Sadducees was an institution, not an inspiration. It was part of an established system of social order with which all their worldly interests were bound up, and their one concern was to maintain the existing equilibrium. Living religion the Sadducees dreaded. A religious movement perturbed them and they did not know what to make of it. When the Christian religion began to put forth its irrepressible expansive power after the Resurrection we are told that "they doubted where unto this would grow". They did not want growing things at all in that sphere. A religion that grew, that operated as a creative or recreative power, that initiated new movements in the soul or in society - a religion that gave men new and infinite conceptions of duty, making them capable of self-dedication and martyrdom, so that you could never tell what mad, disturbing thing they would do or try - a religion that disclosed another world, and made a power so incommensurable with all present interests as immortality a present motive in the lives of common men - such a religion the Sadducees could only regard as the enemy. They did not like it; they had no mind to it and no time for it. They were more than willing to give religion the formal acknowledgment which its place in the social order required, but a religion which for anything they could tell might explode the social order was something with which they could hold no terms.'

42) 4:1-12

The Sadducees asked, 'By what power or by what name have ye done this? Their question is significant. Peter had already explained by what power the miracle had been performed (3:16). The high priests were therefore frankly rejecting this as an explanation, and demanding another. 'Miracles do not happen' was their attitude this in spite of the incontrovertible evidence before their eyes! They were almost daring Peter to repeat what he had earlier said, hoping perhaps that a night in prison had served to cool his ardour. How little they knew! As if that would change the glory that had touched his life! How unwilling men are to face up to the realities of the situation! The apostolic preaching had cut across their whole position and all their cherished notions. Little wonder they were disturbed! For if the gospel is the breaking in of the supernatural power from beyond into men's lives, it turns a man's natural world upside down. When people are prepared for this to happen, they enter into life that is life indeed. But when they are not, it creates an intolerable situation for them. They are forced to seek another explanation of the miracles that are taking place before their very eyes. This is how it was with the Sadducees here.

43) 4:1-12

It is remarkable that so many of our modern ideas are flatly contradicted by the New Testament. One of the most fashionable today is tolerance. We are told that the true Christian attitude is to be tolerant, and intolerance is roundly condemned as sinful and contrary to the spirit of love manifested by Christ. But this is an attitude that is foreign to the genius of the New Testament as a whole, and is expressly challenged by Peter's words in 12, where he proclaims an exclusive salvation. The fact is, Christianity is essentially an intolerant religion; it stands alone, and will brook no rivals in its absolute claims on man's soul. It is the only way, the only ground of salvation, and all other ground is sinking sand. 'There is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved'. James Denney, commenting on a theme of this nature, says, "I cannot agree with those who disparage this, or affect to forgive it, as the unhappy beginning of religious intolerance....if God has really done something in Christ on which the salvation of the world depends, and if He has made it known, then it is a Christian duty to be intolerant of everything which ignores, denies or explains it away. The man who perverts it is the worst enemy of God and man....intolerance like this is an essential element in the true religion: it is the instinct of self preservation in it; the unforced and uncompromising defence of that on which the glory of God and the salvation of the world depends'. No man of burning convictions can ever be tolerant, nor need he be concerned or ashamed on this account for, as G.K. Chesterton once said, 'Tolerance is the particular virtue of those who do not really believe in anything'.

44) 4:1-12

Peter's words in answer to the challenge of the high priests simply reiterates his earlier message in the previous chapter. What a wonderful blending of human responsibility and divine over-ruling we see in the words 'Whom ye crucified, whom God raised up' (10). They were responsible for the sin of crucifying Christ, yet in that very act the divine purpose was fulfilled for the world's salvation, and the divine overthrow of, and triumph over, the plans and purposes of men. This is the heart of the gospel, and it is in this that its power resides. The reference to the stone rejected by the builders is interesting and significant (et Psalm 118:22). This is a verse quoted three times in the New Testament, in Luke 20:17, by Jesus, where He is rejected by the Jews as a way of salvation, here, where it is healing and wholeness as a symbol of the messianic salvation that is repudiated, and in 1 Pet 2:7, where the reference is to Christ as a way of life and growth in grace and moral transformation. Here is a sermon, then, from the threefold use of the Psalmist's words: a true anchorage of life, a true bulwark for eternity, a true relationship of friendship and fellowship with Christ. This is what men reject when they reject the gospel.

45) 4:13-22

However opposed the Sadducees might be to the work of the gospel and the idea of the supernatural, one thing they could not gainsay - the fact that the lame man had been healed. This is the real answer to the criticism that is often levelled at the evangelical faith - the testimony of transformed lives is incontestable and indisputable. Results speak for themselves, and in spite of all the harsh and contemptuous sneers from men who ought to know better, the fruits of work that is based on faithfulness to the biblical gospel in all its fulness are manifest, both in changed lives and potential for Christian service, for all who have eyes to see. But so often men are, Sadducee-like, unwilling to accept the evidence of their own eyes in this matter, and thereby prove the truth of the old adage that there are none so blind as those that will not see. This should serve to assure our hearts in face of the kind of criticism such people tend to level against gospel work; they disguise the real nature of their opposition, but it needs to be known that behind and beyond all possible criticisms of those who thus minister - and they are many - the real heart of the objection is to the living word of Christ and His claims on their lives. 'We will not', they mean, 'have this Man to reign over us, if it is going to mean this'.

46) 4:13-22

The dilemma of the Sadducees is almost comical. They wanted to temporise, as we see in 15-17. But you cannot just shelve the gospel challenge; it is too relentless, and demands that sides be taken. 'He that is not with Me is against Me', said Christ. This is probably why they resorted to threats (17), but they might have spared themselves the trouble. As well try to stop the tide coming in as try to stop Spirit-filled men proclaiming the truth of the gospel. The constraint of divine love was upon the apostles; they could not but speak what they knew. Nor, we believe, were their words unrestrained or extravagant, for when a man is under the control of the Spirit of God his mind becomes crystal-clear, his thoughts well-ordered, his words incisive and economical. Not one unnecessary word was spoken on the day of Pentecost; everything that Peter said carried the divine imprimatur. The Spirit's symbol that day was a tongue - of fire! This is something that no earthly power, however determined and however powerful, can prevent or restrain.

47) 4:23-31

The reaction of the apostles to the opposition of the Sadducees is instructive. They prayed. And their prayer, here recorded, is rich in spiritual teaching. First and foremost, they declared their faith in the sovereignty of God. 'Lord, Thou art God'. Nothing could be more important than this. It is essential, in all prayer, to begin here, reminding ourselves in any and every situation that God is on the throne. One marvels at the healthy, objective outlook of the apostles in this circumstance. The problem they were facing was an acute one; a serious situation was looming up on the young Church.

But their eyes were upon the Lord, not on the crisis; they had the true perspective. How needful for us to learn this! It is easy to say 'Take it to the Lord in prayer', but all too often in our experience the 'it' becomes more important than 'the Lord', and we brood over it until it fills our whole horizon and our hearts are almost paralysed with fear and dread. Some kinds of prayer are not very helpful to the soul. Subjective, brooding prayer simply directs attention to the problem in hand and, like shadows on the wall in the firelight, it becomes grotesquely distorted out of all proportion to its reality. Only when a room is lit properly do the distortions disappear, and only when the white light of God's sovereignty shines into a situation will our fears subside. This the apostles recognised as they gathered for prayer, and we also must force ourselves to make the declaration they did, in face of any problem, else we shall lose out right from the outset.

48) 4:23-31

The apostles also went to the Scriptures in their problem. They believed that God had a word for them. This is where a true knowledge of the Scriptures is important - as a source of strength and encouragement, and of insight into, and understanding of, any particular situation (this is something more than merely remembering texts, for the blessing of the Scriptures depends not on memorising it but assimilating it). In this instance, the Holy Spirit guided them to Psalm 2. This is very significant, for thus they saw immediately the real underlying spiritual issues in the conflict - 'we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against principalities, against powers....' They recognised, through the Scriptures, that the opposition they had encountered partook of the basic spiritual struggle between light and darkness, and it was in this Psalm that they renewed their conviction that God was on the throne. How could it be otherwise with such a verse as 4, 'He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh'. In that part of the divine Word, there is no doubt at all Who is in control. 'Lord, Thou art God'. And therein lies our peace.

49) 4:23-31

We should not miss the fact that the apostles did not ask God to relieve them of the pressures that were upon them, or to remove the threatenings. Why not? Because they did not feel free to do so. They had no assurance that this was the thing to ask. There is a wisdom and spiritual realism here which we do not always see nowadays. It is possible to waste so much time in prayer by asking the wrong things, things which are outwith the divine will and purpose for us. We should be sure that we can ask before we do ask. To pray without reference to the will of the Lord is to indicate a complete misunderstanding of the meaning of prayer. If we prayed more for a discernment of God's will and purpose, our asking would be far more pointed and explicit, simple and straightforward. In this case, the apostles did not ask amiss. They prayed, 'Lord behold their threatenings', and what they did was, in effect not to ask for the removal of the crisis - they knew they were committed to battles as soldiers of the cross - but for its conversion. They recognised that it presented an opportunity whereby God could glorify His Name. Not freedom from adversity, but boldness in adversity was their plea, and how wonderfully their cry was answered! Lord, teach us to pray like this.

50) 4:23-31

One further point must occupy our attention in this message before we leave it. God's answer to the apostles' prayer is expressed in 31, 'They spake the word of God with boldness' (cf also 33). There has often been misunderstanding of the meaning of these words. It is false to the entire spirit of the New Testament to suppose that boldness is the same thing as bluster and uncouthness. The boldness that the Spirit gives adds a directness and pungency to the speech, but it is never the sort of plainness that can only be termed rudeness. We once listened to a callow youth speaking at an open-air meeting, ostensibly witnessing to Christ, but his words and his attitude could only be described as insolent and repellant. What we must learn is that faithfulness to Christ is not the same thing as offensiveness. There is such a thing as the offence of the cross, but this must not be confused with the offensiveness of some Christians. There are some who cannot conceive of bold, aggressive witness except as being unpleasant and forbidding. But these apostles were gracious men. It is said of them that 'great grace was upon them all' (35). The fire in them was a fire that warmed as well as burned. A spirituality that repels is not real and true. The Spirit of God is a fragrant Spirit, and the beauty of the Lord our God rests upon those that are truly yielded to Him.

51) 4:32-37

These verses certainly give the impression that after the crisis and the prayer there was a blossoming out into a large place so far as the experience of the early Church was concerned. And one is prompted to remark how this young Church experienced, almost in the by going, a fulness of the things that the Church today so desperately and urgently lacks. They had unity, they were of one heart and one soul; there was a financial sufficiency, and there was no lack, for they had all things common. There was great power in their witness, with telling impact on the community; and great grace was upon them all. How slow we are to see that all these things flow as by-products of something else: the spiritual vitality that God gives them that obey Him. The theological reason for this is of course the 'death-life' pattern which it displays. In an earlier Note we stressed that the mounting opposition was the 'crucible' in which the ongoing purposes of God were furthered and brought to fruition, and this was also the 'crucible' of power so far as the disciples were concerned; it was their fiery baptism, and the way in which their union with Christ in His death and resurrection expressed itself in their experience. What we read here is, in fact, the illustration, in practical terms, of what Paul expounds in 2 Cor 4 about having treasure in earthen vessels and bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus that the life also of Jesus might be manifest in them. It is 'death working' in them, bringing forth life in themselves and in others.

52) 4:36-37

Barnabas is the exemplification of this 'death-life' pattern, and shows the 'other side' of the seemingly stern and uncompromising challenge of total consecration. The goal of sacrifice in the New Testament is never death, but life abundant, and the fruit of sharing Christ's sufferings is the emergence of Christlikeness of character. His action here indicates a spirit of self-denial, self-sacrifice and self-detachment which was the expression of His love and devotion to Christ and his gratitude for salvation. But look what it did in him! He was surnamed 'the son of consolation' by the apostles, because he was held in reputation among them for the ministry of grace and helpfulness that characterised him. In 11:23,24 we see just how valuable that ministry was, in the ability he had to establish young believers in the faith and encourage them to follow on to know the Lord. Every evidence in his life is an indication of how wonderfully this kind of consecration proves to be a gateway out of straitening and limitation into life and fulness. As the old Puritan once said, 'Why should I shrink at the pruning knife of my Lord? He purposeth a crop'.

53) 5:1-11

In the nature of the case, the very attractiveness of the life manifested in the apostolic band presents dangers, and one danger is that there are those who may be tempted to seek it at a cut-price rate. Ananias and Sapphira were such, and it is in this light that we must understand the solemn account given in these verses. The first thing that we must recognise is that this was an attack on the early Church by Satan. We have already referred to the 'attack and counter attack' theme running throughout Acts, the thrust and counter-thrust of the powers of good and evil, with the Spirit of God always maintaining the initiative. In chapter 4 Satan engineered the opposition of the Sadducees; this failed in its purpose, and led to another Pentecost. Here he employs another of his wiles, a subtle and stealthy attempt to corrupt the Church that he had failed to dismay by opposition. The words in the parable of the wheat and tares expresses the underlying reality of the story with great simplicity and directness: 'An enemy hath done this'. It would be well for us if we could always be as clear-sighted in our understanding of the problems and difficulties that face us in our work.

54) 5:1-11

The statement that Ananias and Sapphira 'kept back part of the price' needs to be interpreted with care. Their sin lay not in refusing to contribute or to give their all, but in pretending to the apostles that the part they gave was their all. It was the sin of hypocrisy and deceit. And the motive underlying this? To understand this we need to turn back to 4:36, 37, where we read that Barnabas, having land, sold it and laid the proceeds at the apostles' feet. His self-sacrificing action had obviously made a very considerable impression on the early Church, and it was this that had raised him to spiritual eminence. The unhappy couple saw this, and coveted it for themselves. But spiritual ambition is a dangerous thing, as it proved for them. They wanted the reputation for saintliness without being prepared to pay the price that saintliness costs. And ultimately, to be thought saintly became more important to them than being saintly. That is a terrible condition of soul, and is the breeding-ground of all that is ugly and horrible in spiritual life. And it led to their lying against the Holy Ghost. O God, save us evermore from pretending to be what we are not. Make and keep us true, O Thou that desirest truth in the inward parts.

55) 5:1-11

The punishment visited upon Ananias and Sapphira was swift and terrifying, and recalls to our minds the solemn words of John, 'There is a sin unto death' (1 John 5:16). The idea of divine judgment is strange and even offensive to modern minds, but it is an indisputable reality in the writings of the New Testament. Nor should we wonder at such a thing happening, especially at such a time as this was, for those were days of mighty spiritual awakening, and extraordinary manifestations of the Spirit abounded. Moreover, the atmosphere of the early Church was one in which hypocrisy and unreality could not live. It was much too vital, and Ananias and Sapphira were playing with fire indeed to have acted such a deception. Not only so: the virus of sin could not have been allowed to exist in these early days of the Church's life. It would have corrupted and paralysed the apostolic testimony, and it would have withered and died in its infancy. God was jealous of its life and health, hence the severity of His dealings with anything that threatened it. Thus, it was not merely the sin of hypocrisy and deceit, but hypocrisy and deceit at such a time, that made it so serious. The Shorter Catechism points out, very properly, that some sins are more heinous in the sight of God than others, because of what they are in themselves, and because of certain aggravations. It was sin in face of the white light of spiritual awakening that made this such a terrible thing in the sight of God.

56) 5:12-16

There are two points to note here. In the first place, the effect of the drastic purifying of the fellowship in the matter of Ananias and Sapphira was a new accession of spiritual power (and the same power that smote them healed the multitudes, to the one a savour of death unto death, to the other a savour of life unto life). It is ever so. It is the Church that loses its purity, in life or in doctrine, that loses its power to bless men. In the second place, the new outpouring of the Spirit was a vindication of the rightness of the apostolic attitude in the matter, in face of any possible criticism from their detractors. God often vindicates His servants in this way by unmistakable evidences when they are obliged to take unpopular action in His service, and we think that people would be well-advised to withhold their criticism and opposition until they have time to see God's imprimatur upon His servants' work, lest they should appear to be setting themselves against God. The truth of the matter is that very often their quarrel is not with the servant, but with the servant's Lord. When a man is acting in obedience to the divine will, God says, in effect, to him, 'He that toucheth you toucheth the apple of Mine eye'. That is the protection and comfort indeed, and should be a terror to evildoers.

57) 5:17-28

It was only to be expected that this new eruption of power would madden the Sadducees authorities still further. The devil contests every forward move of the Church of God. But it is fruitless to try to shut up the word of the gospel by putting its preachers into prison, as the Sadducees now tried to do. And this time it would almost seem as if the Lord were playing with them, and mocking their unavailing efforts. For He did not allow the disciples to wait till the morning before being released. He sent His angels to open the prison doors and release them and direct them to the Temple to preach once again the all-prevailing Name of the Saviour. In doing so, He asserted in a most satisfying manner the reality of the supernatural which the Sadducees did not believe in. There is something very funny about this, but it must have been highly disconcerting and dismaying for them. When you assert that there is no such thing as the supernatural, and something supernatural happens before your very eyes, it makes you look very silly! It was this fact, no doubt, that tempered their rage and rather took the sting out of it. One can never appear very effective when one has been so emphatically deflated, as their protest in 28 shows. Were they beginning to realise that it was vain to pit their strength and wits against such an invincible power as the gospel?

58) 5:17-28

There is something very thrilling about the contest between the Church and the powers of darkness. We are never allowed to lose the sense of exhilaration that comes from the knowledge that Christ is always in control of the situation. The initiative is ever with Him and not even prison doors can hinder His purposes (19). And if it is true that the forward march of the gospel draws the enemy's fire, it is also blessedly true that Satan's attacks are swiftly and superlatively countered and made the occasion of a glorious display of divine power. We speak of carrying the war into the enemy's camp - well, this was the divine directive, 'Go, stand and speak in the Temple'. This should be a great encouragement to all who are engaged in work that is fraught with difficulties and resistance and opposition. We must neither lose heart nor falter in our testimony, but continue to speak in the knowledge that this is the weapon that is mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds. Just what this should involve may be seen in 21, where we learn that the disciples entered the Temple and taught. It is not always realised that the evangelism of Acts was a teaching evangelism. The apostles expounded the gospel, and proclaimed the whole counsel of God. That always has been and always will be the most effective evangelism. It is the primary and the plenary power of the Word of God that is constantly thrust upon us by this wonderful book of early Church history, and is one of its chief lessons for today.

59) 5:29-32

The Sadducees had forbidden them to preach; God had commanded them, 'Go stand and speak' (20). The issue, then, was one of simple choice, obeying men or obeying God. And Peter and the others were intent on obeying Him. And look what that obedience was leading to! All Jerusalem was filled with their doctrine, and conviction was being brought home upon the enemies of the gospel, as 28 makes clear. They themselves had said, 'His blood be upon us and upon our children'; it was late in the day to be complaining now! Their words were truer than they knew, for the essence of all conviction of sin is that men realise themselves implicated in the sin of crucifying Jesus. All mankind is responsible for the shedding of His blood. But Peter and the Apostles were intent on something more than bringing 'this man's blood' upon their heads; they wanted also to bring it to their hearts, that they might know His cleansing and redeeming power. It is the blood that makes atonement for the soul and makes peace with God. That was what the apostles were proclaiming, and that is really the theme of Peter's words here.

60) 5:29-32

Twice in these verses does Peter speak of obedience to God, and the word he uses is not the usual Greek one but one which denotes absolute and unquestioning obedience to authority. We are to yield Christ the homage of our hearts because He is a Prince; and because He is a Saviour we must proclaim His name and His salvation. Two things in particular must be noted here. Firstly, repentance is a gift from the exalted Lord. Just as no man can come to Christ except the Father draw him, so no man can turn from sin but for the grace of the exalted Saviour. Doddridge's words, 'He drew me and I followed on' are true at every point in man's salvation, and this should make us lean more completely on His sovereign grace in the work of evangelism than we sometimes do. Secondly, Peter tells us that God gives the Holy Spirit to them that obey Him. Nothing could indicate more clearly the moral basis of the gospel and of Christian experience. If we think of the coming of the Spirit to the heart upon repentance and faith, then we realise that true conversion is a return to a new obedience to God; and if we think of the coming of the Spirit in fulness of grace and power we learn that this is not a mystical or emotional experience, but a moral condition in which the heart is utterly submitted to the Lordship of Christ. This should prevent us from wasting precious time languishing after some spiritual afflatus, and set us searching our hearts to see if there be aught in us that is contrary to the holy laws of God. His universe is built on moral principles, and what He desires supremely is conformity to them. Nothing else will suffice - nothing!

61) 5:33-42

These verses reveal in yet another way the wonder of God's sovereign control over events. The effect of Peter's outspoken boldness was to evoke a murderous hatred in the hearts of the Jewish rulers, and it was clear that the disciples were in jeopardy of their lives. But God laid His restraining hand upon them, as if to say 'Thus far, but no further', and beyond that they could not go. The divine intervention was instant and effectual as, with an almost careless ease, He took up one of their number and made him the instrument of His will. Well might the Psalmist say, 'He that is in the heavens shall laugh'. Is it irreverent to think that there was a smile on His face as he manipulated the situation to suit His sovereign purposes? A smile, yes, but a grim smile withal, putting on Gamaliel's lips words that might well have struck terror into any Council's heart, 'lest haply ye be found to fight against God'. It ought to thrill us to realise that such a God is at hand to protect and defend us when we are standing faithful to His Word and will. Well might the disciples depart rejoicing to be counted worthy to suffer for His Name. The sufferings may be great in Christian service, but the compensations and rewards are ineffable.

62) 5:33-42

There is another point that emerges from the episode of Gamaliel. Although the Jewish teacher meant well and was sincere in his statements (he may even have had a secret sympathy with the apostles' teaching, for all we know!) his attitude, from one very important point of view, is highly unsatisfactory and indeed reprehensible. For what he advocated - and what he was apparently doing himself - was to wait and see how things would turn out before taking sides on the question of the gospel. He was, in fact, sitting on the fence, and his was a counsel of caution indeed! But it was the kind of counsel that is fatal for spiritual well-being. Consider the situation of those days. After generations of barrenness and deadness in the land, the Lord God had visited His people, and a great new thing had happened before their eyes. Pentecost and the outpouring of the Spirit was behind them, the Lord was adding to the Church daily such as should be saved, and everywhere men's lives were being transformed. A new humanity had been formed that was taking that lost, bankrupt world by storm, and yet - in face of all this, the counsel Gamaliel gave was: 'Wait and see how things develop. Perhaps it is of God, perhaps not. Don't make a move in either direction in case you may be wrong'. How tragic that in face of such an obvious work of God they should have been so dubious of it, so blind to it, so uncertain! Those who cannot make up their minds about the gospel in face of evidence which is more than sufficient to convince all reasonable doubt are in the grip of something so dark and deadly as to prove fatal to the soul.

63) 6:1-4

There is more than one way of expounding this chapter. We could take it, for example, as a study in Church policy, and in the manner in which deacons should be chosen and appointed in the Church. This would be no vain exercise, for there is much to learn here, and we would be all the better of adhering to the principles revealed in this incident. In this connection we would learn that the practical, temporal affairs of the Church - 'serving the tables' - need the fulness of the Holy Spirit in those who attend to them, no less than the spiritual work of preaching the word of God. It needs more than a man of practical affairs to attend to such practicalities in the Church of God: it needs the anointing of the Holy Ghost. And, basically, all these so-called 'practical', temporal matters are spiritual, and can be done most worthily by spiritual men. Paul was later to say, 'Whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God'. But how can you do this, if you do not have the Spirit? But, important as this is, it is not so important as some other lines of approach to the passage, for the spiritual implications of the incident and what followed it are considerable and of far-reaching significance in the development of the work of the gospel in the early Church, and this will be our concern in the Notes that follow.

64) 6:1-4

The setting of the incident is significant. At the end of the previous chapter, which recounts the apostles' experience with the Sanhedrin, and their being beaten by its orders, we read not only that they rejoiced to be counted worthy to suffer shame for the name of Christ, but also that they 'ceased not to teach and to preach Jesus Christ'. The persecution, pressure, opposition, had precisely no effect in either slowing the apostles down or making them discouraged. In the ultimate sense they ignored it, they were dead to its influence and effects. And when the storm abated, they were still going on. This is of fundamental importance in the Christian life. Even the setbacks - and the failures too - do not matter so much if only we keep going. It is not the fall or the failure that hinders or sets back the work of God: it is that so often, when we fall or fail, we stay down (cf Micah 7:8). This seems to be underlined in the opening verse of this new chapter, where we read that the number of the disciples was multiplied. At first, in Acts 2 and 3, it is said that the Lord added to the Church such as should be saved; but here addition is replaced by multiplication! It is in this context also that we are to understand the murmuring that arose in the fellowship of the Church - the context of continuing warfare with the powers of darkness. It is never a once-for-all battle that we win against Satan. There are many and repeated encounters, and he has many wiles. And what we need to learn here is just how resourceful he is in his assaults upon the people of God. He could not by persecution tempt the apostles to deny their Lord; he could not by hypocrisy undermine the vitality of their fellowship. So now he tried, by the spread of misunderstanding, to divide the fellowship and introduce dissension. This is the significance of the murmuring that arose among them.

65) 6:1-4

The word translated 'murmuring' indicates a sullen spirit of discontent, something under the surface, and therefore causing secret heart-burning and criticism. It is the insidious character of such an attitude that makes it so deadly. Whether or not the complaint was justified is not the point - such a storm of bitterness can arise from an imagined neglect as much as from a real one. The truly serious matter is that by the very use of the word 'neglect' the Grecians were believing the worst of the apostles, and when you think the worst of people's actions you have already got out of touch with the Spirit of love, for love is always eager to believe the best (1 Cor 13:5). This is what opens the door to Satan. It 'gives place' to the devil. Could it not have been a simple case of accidental oversight instead of deliberate discrimination and neglect? Something unintentional which, if it had been brought to the surface frankly could have been put right immediately, and without bitterness? How important to believe the best about each other and give each other the benefit of the doubt, and what tragic misunderstandings would be avoided if we did!

66) 6:1-4

The apostles dealt with the problem in a wonderful spirit of grace and love. They realised the expanding implications of the 'social' side of the Church's work - by this time the sharing mentioned in 4:34 ff had been organised into a daily ministration - and appointed men deacons - to take charge of it. And the men appointed were all Hellenist Christians. All had Greek names. What gesture could have been more gracious or peacemaking than that? They, the apostles, however, were determined to devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word. This must not be misunderstood. It does not mean that they themselves were indifferent to social issues, or regarded them as unimportant. One has only to look at the qualifications deemed necessary for this work - men of honest report, filled with the Spirit and wisdom - to see that the apostles could not have thought it unimportant. Nor does their action give us any warrant for saying that since they are not called to the ministry of the Word they are entitled to make the 'social' aspect of the work their life. This was not true of these deacons, for spiritual issues were always paramount in their experience, as witness Stephen and Philip. The tragedy in our day is that the social side of the Church's work has tended to become a substitute for the proclamation of the message of salvation, instead of an inevitable expression of it.

67) 6:1-4

We should note the firm insistence made by the apostles about the primacy of prayer and the preaching of the Word. It would have been well for the Church if he had been paid to this holy determination. It is an unfortunate but incontrovertible fact that both at home and abroad God's servants have so much other work to do besides preaching and prayer, work that through use and wont has become necessary, that the true function of the ministry has become almost obscured and made impossible of fulfilment, simply because there is now no time for it. The holy priorities of the Word and prayer must be jealously guarded and established in the life of any man who hopes to do lasting work for God, whatever else may have to be dropped, and however much he may be misunderstood for doing so. He is answerable to God, not men, and it will not be accounted as a faithful stewardship in the gospel that he should have become so bogged down with administration, or the raising of money, or the successful running of a social club that preaching the Word had perforce to take a very subsidiary place in his scheme of priorities. It is required in stewards that a man be found faithful - to his commission to preach the gospel.

68) 6:5-15

The apostles dealt with the situation so graciously and effectively that the result was a new spiritual impetus in the work. The manner in which this is described is important. We read that 'the word of God increased' (7). This might be interpreted to mean that the power of the word increased, as doubtless it did, but we think it refers to the increase of the Word itself in the sense that there was at this time a development in doctrine, and that the preaching took on a new and deeper tone. Hitherto there had been nothing distinctive in Christian doctrine apart from the proclamation of Christ as Messiah, no decisive pattern that was obviously going to supercede the Old Testament economy. Up to this point Christianity was regarded as a Jewish sect, within Judaism. But soon a real departure was to be indicated, in the development of a Church that was to be, not Jewish, but world-wide. And it would seem that Stephen's preaching was the vehicle by means of which it began (10). Here was a man through whom God was to communicate something significant to the Church. The full implications of this are seen only in the next chapter, where Stephen's doctrine was seen by the enemies of the Church to imperil the very existence of the Jewish religion as such. It is very wonderful to see the Holy Spirit seeking to break through with deeper truth. How ready we should be to receive His gracious teaching, in whatever circumstances it may come to us!

69) 6:6-15

Stephen is said (8) to have been full of grace (so the word is in the original) and power, and these verses seem to be intent on drawing attention to the Christ-likeness of his whole bearing. Luke uses almost the same expressions to describe him as are used of Christ in the gospels. We have only to recall such phrases as 'full of grace and truth' (John 1:14), 'filled with wisdom' (Luke 2:40), to appreciate their 'echo' here. Indeed, not only at this point, but also in the record of his death at the end of the next chapter we are irresistibly reminded of the experience of Christ. Like Him, Stephen was slain outside the city, praying forgiveness on his murderers and commending his spirit to the Lord. We may learn from this that identification with Christ in His sufferings is a practical reality for the believer, not a mystical theory. It is what Paul calls 'filling up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ' (Col 1:24). This is what 'taking up the cross' in discipleship involves, both in its sufferings and glory. It is only to be expected that likeness to Christ should develop in a man who lives in close fellowship with Him day by day. Let us ask ourselves whether anyone would expect us to be living close to Christ from the likeness we bear to Him in our daily walk. Do we remind people of Him?

70) 6:6-15

Consider now what is said of Stephen's preaching. In 10 we read that 'they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake'. What are these words meant to convey to us? That here is a man, a preacher of the Word who not only has a grasp of the faith once delivered to the saints, not only is orthodox in his theology, but supremely and above all has the ability to make the Christian faith come alive in a way that makes it come out of the Scriptures in which it is enshrined and confront men inescapably with the awesome presence of the living God. It is one thing to be interesting, instructive and impressive in one's preaching, but quite another to be able to communicate life, and to effect a meeting between the Saviour and the souls of men. This is what Stephen's preaching was able to do. It represents to us the dynamic of the gospel, the reality of the gospel of salvation. He was a man of vision, able to make the gospel sound what it really is, a glorious, vital and revitalising power in the lives of men. This is the work of the Holy Spirit alone. No other power can do this. And unless the power of the Spirit attends the witness of the Church, all it does will be in vain. The Holy Spirit is the executive of the Godhead, charged with the task of making real to the hearts of men what Christ has done for them in His death and resurrection. And when He does, the powers of the world to come are abroad on the earth. O for such preachers today!

71) 7:1-50

This is a long passage, but we could not well break up Stephen's tremendous utterance without loss. It should certainly be read through in one piece. Chapter 6 marks the emergence of forces within the Church destined to enable it to realise its world mission as a faith for all men. Here, the significance of the new development is seen for what it is. The accusation against Stephen was that he spoke against Moses. The truth, however, was that he spoke against the Jews' interpretation of Moses. His contention in effect was that they had consistently misunderstood the meaning of their own Scriptures, particularly the Messianic prophecies. The Jews must certainly have seen the implications of his teaching as attacking their whole basic position, and placing them entirely in the wrong in their attitude to Christ. They were bound to react violently against him. Stephen of course was not the first to proclaim that Jesus was the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies - this had been a cardinal factor in the apostolic teaching from the beginning - but it was in his teaching that it was fully realised that the new faith of the Christians and Judaism as taught by the scribes and Pharisees were mutually exclusive, and that the one was to supercede the other by rightly interpreting the Old Testament and fulfilling it. In this respect, Stephen's ministry is pivotal for the entire development of the Christian faith.

72) 7:1-50

Stephen's masterly grasp of the Scriptures is particularly noteworthy. There is unquestionably a link between his gracious life and his being so rooted in the Word, for this is the soil where such lives of grace are nurtured and brought to maturity. God's Word is a living Word, and its virtue touches our lives ever more deeply when we are reverently seeking and obeying its teaching. It is significant also that this New Testament prophet, proclaiming the message of the new dispensation of grace, should dwell so largely in the Old Testament Scriptures.

This should convince us that an understanding of the Old Testament is essential to a true and adequate grasp of the gospel. We are sometimes perturbed at the attitude which seems to suggest that the Old Testament can be neglected in favour of the New, in the life and growth of believers. The apostles would have found it very hard to understand this, because for them the New was the fulfilment of the Old. This is the point of Stephen's utterance, in which he makes us stand back, as it were, and in one broad sweep see what the Old Testament as a whole is about. He takes a straight line through from Abraham to Christ, unfolding the entire history as a process of divine education, bringing out the incontrovertible truth that the Jews had persistently failed both to understand God's dealings with them and to respond to His grace. Here is divinely-inspired interpretation of Scripture at its best, and should help us to a fuller appreciation of its meaning and significance.

73) 7:1-50

We may note the main point of Stephen's teaching which cut so completely across traditional Judaism and led to the establishment of Christianity as a religion without frontiers. The Jews had held that Palestine was the Holy Land, but Stephen points out that God met with the Patriarchs in Ur, Egypt and the wilderness, and consequently is not confined to any one land (this was foreshadowed in our Lord's teaching to the woman of Samaria, John 4:21-24). This opens the door to Gentile worship, a thought maddening to the Jews, who despised them. Then, the Jews insisted on circumcision, but Stephen points out that the promise was given before circumcision was instituted, and therefore was not tied to it. This Paul amplifies in Romans 4, and we may gather from this that Stephen was the great Apostle's precursor. Next, the Tabernacle was instituted before the Temple and was moveable, and therefore the Temple was not essential for worship, as the Jews insisted. Above all, the Jews had at all times rejected their God-appointed deliverers, and had simply summed up all their previous history in rejecting and crucifying the Son of God Whom these deliverers had foreshadowed. It is little wonder that in maddened conviction at such an indictment they stoned him to death.

74) 7:1:50

All we have said is written large on the pages of the New Testament, in the gospels and in the epistles alike. What Jesus did, and what the apostles did, was not to preach something new, but to go back to a true understanding of an Old Testament that the Jews had themselves consistently and completely misunderstood. In this sense, the gospel was not an innovation, but something old, imbedded in the Old Testament and covered over by a tragic dis-interpretation. But - and this is the very heart of the issue in Stephen's challenge - this misinterpretation, this misconstruction placed on their own religion and faith by the Jews, was not merely a partial grasp of the truth, a harmless deviation or variant that could still nevertheless be called authentic Judaism, or a simple misunderstanding concerning which it could be said that they had 'not quite' got a grasp of the truth. Stephen speaks very differently. He says (51), 'Ye stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye....' These men were all wrong; right from the beginning they had been wrong. It was not a case of looking at truth from a slightly different angle, or a different way of saying essentially the same thing. The two viewpoints were diametrically opposed to one another. And so it is today: when men react against the gospel that summons them to repentance, that stresses the necessity of regeneration and the reality of conversion, what they are doing is not simply subscribing to another 'school of thought', as if the evangelical viewpoint were only one among several possible interpretations of the gospel; they are resisting the Holy Ghost, and lining themselves up as enemies of the cross of Christ.

75) 7:51-60

We have already commented on the similarity of Stephen's attitude in death to our Lord's. There remain two further comments. The first is the tremendous statement in 55. It does not surprise us to read that he was full of the Holy Ghost, for only a man thus endowed could have spoken so, and borne himself as he did. His attitude in the crisis - looking steadfastly up into heaven is a pointer to us in our lesser testings. If only we could see as he saw, in time of trial! Is this what Peter meant in his epistle when he spoke of the spirit of glory and of God being upon those that pass through the fiery trial. (1 Pet 4:14)? It is deeply suggestive that Jesus should be spoken of as standing, not as is usually said of Him, sitting, at the right hand of God. Does it not indicate to us the intense personal interest and concern of our great Advocate, and His readiness to move on our behalf? Are we passing through deep waters today? Let us think of Him Who is even now standing at the ready, mighty in power to undertake for us.

Secondly (58), there appears in the story one who is destined to become the chief instrument in propagating Stephen's teaching, Saul of Tarsus, whose soul was scorched and shattered by the Christ-like death he beheld that day. How wonderful to see God's irresistible, forward movement continuing, death and martyrdom notwithstanding. The very act which, to the Jews, seemed effectually to have silenced this teaching that menaced their religion, became the means under God of bringing it to its full flower and establishing the new Faith as a world religion. God buries His workmen and carries on His work! How wonderful! We may be sure that what we do for Him will not be allowed to fall to the ground.

76) 7:51-60

The spirit manifest in Stephen's martyrdom was not something unique, but common to all the early disciples. Not all of them, or even many, were martyred as he was, but they were all animated by the same spirit. A dictionary definition of the word 'martyr' says 'One who by his death bears witness to the truth'. We see the force of this as applied to Stephen, but the fact is that the word 'martyr' is simply a transliteration of the Greek word which means 'witness'. Every believer is therefore meant to have the 'martyr' spirit. It is always by death that we bear witness to the truth of the gospel, and indeed only by 'death' in the spiritual sense. As Paul says in 2 Cor 4:10-12, 'Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be manifest in us. The New Testament phrase used to describe this is 'sharing in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings' (cf Acts 5:41, Gal 6:14, Phil 3:10, Col 1:24, 2 Cor 4:7, Rom 8:36, 2 Cor 11:3). When the gospel really touches a man's life, it marks that life with the marks of the cross. This expresses itself, as Calvin often pointed out, in two ways, inwardly and outwardly. There is the dying to self and sin which is the believer's mortification - this is the inward - and there is the conformity of our outward life expressed in the concrete experience of suffering shame and reproach. The inward 'dying' begins in and with the grace of repentance, which is a turning from sin and a bidding farewell to the old ways, and a pledging of oneself to continue in this attitude day by day, saying No to self and Yes to Christ and His good and perfect will. The outward is the cost, in terms of ridicule, contumely and scorn that often starts as soon as we nail our colours to the mast, and which continue throughout our Christian life, and may lead to martyrdom, as it did for Stephen. But alongside the fellowship of His sufferings, there is also fellowship in His risen life, and to this we shall turn in tomorrow's Note.

77) 7:51-60

Fellowship with Christ in His risen life is also expressed both inwardly and outwardly. As to the first, this is seen in, for example, Paul's words in Gal. 2:20: 'I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me', and in 2 Cor 4:10: 'Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body'. This, as we have already remarked, is seen very graphically in Stephen, and Luke seems intent on drawing attention to the 'reflection' of Christ in him. As to the second, the outward, here, in Stephen, 'was a re-enactment' of the death of Christ in the death of His servant. Well, in the watching crowd there was a young man whose name was Saul, and what he saw that day never left him, but led to his conversion. For in the death of Stephen he saw the cross of Christ, and the word of the cross became the power of God to his soul. It was then that the light began to break on him, and haunt his heart and conscience till he found peace at last at the feet of the glorified Saviour on the Damascus Road. Death - to use Paul's own words - 'worked' in Stephen to produce life in Saul. This is the law of spiritual harvest, and committal to Christ ought not to mean less than this to any who name the Name of Christ.

78) 8:1-4

Stephen's martyrdom set off a round of bitter and widespread persecution of the Church. The Jews now saw clearly that this new religion implied the complete eclipse of their own. It is evident that the breaking up and scattering of the fellowship was an event of major significance. We might be tempted to ask why God allowed such a thing to happen if we did not remember the underlying theme of the book and realise that God was working sovereign majesty, over-ruling the wiles of Satan for His own wise purposes. The pattern for the unfolding and expansion of the Church's witness is given in Acts 1:8 - Jerusalem, Judaea, Samaria, the uttermost parts of the earth - and at this point the outward movement is to Samaria. This is very wonderful. The persecution was the work of Satan, but it became the means in God's hands of a new outreach of His grace. This ought to help us to see Satan's attacks and pressures on our lives in proper perspective, and learn to regard them as the possibility of a new departure, an important advance and development in spiritual life. The early disciples did so, at all events. This is the force of the 'therefore' in 4. It was no time for weeping, they recognised, over the misfortune of being scattered. They took the initiative and made capital out of their predicament. They rose to the occasion, breasting the storm and 'using' it for the gospel.

79) 8:1-4

Underlying what was said in yesterday's Note is the principle: out of death, life; out of travail, triumph. But we can go further than this. The outward movement of expansion recorded here took place in face of what might be called an undoubted spiritual inertia. There were human factors which might well, but for the over-ruling, over-riding grace of God, have hindered and stultified the work of expansion. In fact, each new development in the life of the early Church seems to have taken place almost in spite of, rather than because of, the Church, and this is true even in the context of the Pentecostal effusion of the Spirit of God. For example, there is at this point almost no sign of any real awareness of the fact that the gospel committed to them was designed for a world-wide mission, and it would seem that the early believers were content (a) that it should establish itself at Jerusalem, and (b) that it should confine itself to the Jews. It took this persecution to drive it far afield, and it took a special vision and a special outpouring of the Spirit on the Gentile Cornelius (Acts 10) to convince a reluctant Jewish-based Church that the Gentiles were to be fellow-heirs with them in the gospel. This is both wonderfully encouraging and also very frightening. It is encouraging on two counts: it shows that these men were men of like passions as ourselves - and yet look what they did accomplish! - and it also reveals a divine sovereignty that is not prepared to be hindered by our weakness and lack of vision. It is frightening also because the evidences are not lacking that God finally had to by-pass His reluctant and tardy disciples in favour of those who were prepared to sit loose to their prejudices and follow His leading. The spiritual initiative in the gospel finally passed from Jerusalem to Antioch, and it was from there, not Jerusalem, that the real missionary expansion took place and was initiated (Acts 13:1-4).

80) 8:1-4

In connection with what was said in yesterday's Note, it is perhaps significant that we find the words 'except the apostles' (1). Why were the apostles not scattered, like the others? Were they not, then, deemed as dangerous to the Jewish establishment as people like Stephen and his friends who were preaching this wider gospel that embraced the Gentiles also? Is it not significant that the price of their safety in Jerusalem in the time of persecution was their silence on the issues for which Stephen was martyred? At all events, there is enough in this to make us want to be very sensitive to the intimations of the Spirit of God. The real danger in the Church is when our minds are so closed by blind prejudice that they are not prepared to be convinced by any kind of evidence put before them. This is to sin against the Holy Spirit, and hinder and limit His working. And Christ's cause has suffered, and His work has withered in places and fellowships where strongly entrenched prejudice has been mistaken for true conviction, and minds have not been prepared to give the Spirit the freedom He desires and demands. You cannot imprison the Spirit in a narrow, hide-bound system; to try to do so, consciously or unconsciously, is to grieve Him away. He withdraws, and a glory departs with Him.

81) 8:1-4

The 'therefore' in 4 is of great significance. What is meant is that this new, outgoing movement of the gospel was the direct result of the persecution, and the divine answer to it. To use Paul's words in 2 Tim 2:9, the 'bonds' and 'imprisonment' of the servants of the Lord 'set free' the Word in renewed, life-giving power. It cannot be bound! They went everywhere preaching the Word - but it was an 'everywhere' dictated and controlled by the Spirit. It was not indiscriminate, but planned, expansion. We find almost a restrictiveness rather than a widespread expansion in the pattern, as becomes clearer in the next few chapters. It is strategic objectives that we see being reached. Also, we should note the emphasis on the preaching of the Word. There are two points here. Firstly, the word is not the usual New Testament word meaning proclamation, but one which means 'evangelising' or 'witnessing to the good news'. Not all believers are called to preach in the formal, official sense, and not all ought to preach in this way. It was not formal preaching as such, but the natural, spontaneous outreach of lives transformed by the grace of God telling forth the message of the gospel to all with whom they came in contact. Secondly, it was their concern to win a hearing for the gospel - and this is the most important thing in the world, for this is what God undertakes and promises to bless. What we have to say in the gospel is charged with divine power. It has pleased God by the foolishness of this to save them that believe. And it is because so often we secretly do not believe this to be so that we tend to trust other things than the truth itself in our endeavours to bring men to Christ. What above all we need today is a recovery of belief in the converting, regenerating power of the gospel.

82) 8:5-8

The remainder of the chapter is devoted to an account of the ministry of Philip, one of the seven deacons ordained by the apostles in 6:1-7. In yesterday's Note we observed that the word rendered 'preaching' in 4 is not the official word for preaching as used of the apostles, but here in 5 the official word is used, and it is in association with this activity that the great things happened in Samaria that are recorded here. Samaria was one of the unlikely places. Few, humanly speaking, would have expected to see blessing there. The Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans. In our Lord's Day the disciples were astonished to hear Him say of that place, 'The fields are white already unto harvest'. And the first-fruits of that harvest were seen in the conversion of the woman at the well. There had been a great stirring then in Samaria, and it only needed a Spirit-filled man to go there to fan the fire into flame again. And what a response! Samaria was waiting for the gospel, and the response they made was immediate and whole-hearted. One sees more and more how necessary the persecution in Jerusalem had been, to send forth the Word to waiting hearts. The 'great joy' in 8 is the fruit of the travail and agony of 1-3. This is always the way.

83) 8:9-25

The story of Simon the sorcerer bears witness to the honesty of Scripture in recording failures and falsities in the work of the gospel. It is easy for the critics to point the finger at a life that belies its profession, but the fact is that in every real awakening there are some spurious conversions, as the parable of the sower plainly teaches. The impressive - and frightening thing, here is to see just how much 'religion' a man may have and still not be right with God. Simon believed; he was baptised; he continued with Philip; yet he had neither part nor lot with the people of God. His exposure was characteristic of such people. One chance word suddenly revealed a whole wrong attitude in his heart. How true it is that by our words we shall be justified or condemned! It is when something is said that could not possibly have been said by a real Christian, something that reveals a total lack of understanding of spiritual values, that we discover where a man really stands. In this sense the things that are hidden are sooner or later made manifest. Ah, how true it is that we give ourselves away! We cannot help doing so; what we really are will out, whether we realise it or not, and will let the discerning know exactly where we stand. No one can live a lie all the time. Sooner or later exposure - self-exposure - will come.

84) 8:9-25

Two points, that are incidental in the record of Simon's exposure, but quite fundamental in the importance they have for us, require some comment. We note in 14-16 that Peter was under the jurisdiction of the apostolic band, being sent by them to Samaria, and cannot therefore be regarded as the head of the Church, as Catholics would have us believe. There is simply no scriptural evidence for their erroneous claim, and much to controvert it. But - even more important - we are told in this passage that the Samaritans believed the gospel and were baptised, then later, when the apostles laid hands on them, they received the Baptism of the Spirit. A whole crop of serious questions arises here. Did believing the gospel, then, for the Samaritans, not constitute their conversion? Was there something lacking in Philip's ministry, that his preaching did not lead people into the experience of the Holy Spirit? Is the reception of the Spirit to be regarded, not as constituting conversion, but as something additional to it? It is easy to see how this passage could be a source of confusion for our thinking, easy too to see how we could allow our pre-conceived notions to jump at this incident as supporting them! Since this opens up an issue of considerable concern to many, we shall spend some time discussing it in the next Note or two.

85) 8:9-25

There are those who would regard what is said in 14-16 as proving beyond any reasonable doubt that conversion is followed, and needs to be followed, by an additional work of grace, viz. the baptism of the Spirit. But the same people would not perhaps be quite so happy with another confident interpretation made, on the same grounds as theirs is made, and with the same force, that this work was something that could be done only by the apostles, and therefore only those who stand in a true apostolic succession from Peter and John, are in a position to lead men into a true experience of the Holy Spirit, and therefore only those who have had hands laid on them by the successors of the apostles can be truly said to be Christians in the New Testament sense of the term. Well, that is what you get for interpreting Scripture out of its overall context, and building doctrines on isolated passages that are not meant to be built on at all! In fact, both interpretations are unwise, and precarious, and for the same reason - the neglect of other Scriptures, which put a very different construction on the situation. In Acts 10:44, for example, reception of the Spirit took place before Peter had stopped preaching and apart from any laying on of apostolic, or other, hands, and before baptism. On the day of Pentecost, the gift of the Holy Ghost was promised to those who would repent and be baptised, apart from the laying on of hands. Saul of Tarsus received his sight and the gift of the Spirit through the laying on of the hands, not of an apostle, but of a simple, humble disciple. Clearly, there was a bewildering variety of spiritual experience in the early Church, and we should learn from this that it is impossible to formulate a definitive doctrine of the Holy Spirit from widely differing experiences recorded in Acts. History, not doctrine, is the subject-matter of the book, and for doctrine we must turn to the epistles; it is there that the Church's theology is defined and set forth.

86) 8:9-25

Two suggestions may be made by way of receiving the complexity of this issue. One is that what the people of Samaria received was not the coming of the Spirit to seal their conversion, but the charismatic gifts of the Spirit, e.g. tongues, prophecy. The other is that what in fact we have here is an example of the sovereign freedom of the Spirit as He certainly worked in the beginnings of the Church - the once-for-all beginnings of the Church - and that we are not meant to build a whole doctrine on any one isolated incident; that in fact these men of Samaria, being the first-fruits of the Gentiles, so to speak, were in much the same position as the early disciples themselves concerning whom we had to say earlier that it was not possible to say when they were converted - when Jesus called them from their nets, or when He said to them, 'Receive ye the Holy Ghost', or when the Spirit 'came upon them' at Pentecost. Just as we cannot take the disciples' experience in this way as definitive for us, neither can we take the Samaritans' experience and build a system on it. The deepest and truest thing we can say about it is that we do not know how to explain it. 'The wind bloweth where it listeth'. To some, this may sound unsatisfactory; but there are some mysteries that we will never be able to explain satisfactorily. And sometimes it is more important to prevent people from putting a wrong and misleading interpretation on the Scriptures than to give them a satisfactory right one.

87) 8:26-40

It is remarkable to realise that Philip was taken from the midst of an extensive spiritual awakening to speak to one individual, and again, as so often in Scripture, we are reminded of the personal care of God for men. It is the Shepherd going to the desert (26) to find His sheep, and we may recall how, similarly, it is recorded of our Lord that He 'must needs go through Samaria' (John 4:4) to seek and to save one who was lost. There are many points worthy of note; not least that here was a man of great authority in the government of his country brought to knowledge of salvation in Christ. It may remain a matter of conjecture as to just how conscious he was of his heart's need as he came to Jerusalem - we think it may well have been the sense of emptiness in his life, in spite of the fact that the best of the ancient world was at his command, that drove him to seek for the living God, and no doubt the promises he read in the Old Testament of blessing and hope haunted his mind and spirit - but it is certainly true that people of the intelligence this man must have had to bring him to such a position of eminence are precisely those who find the problem of life most acute and agonising. It is a mistake to assume that intelligent people will be indifferent to the answer the gospel offers to the problem of man's need. Always where men think does the tragic dilemma and mystery of life obtrude itself. And, having found no sure word to resolve the perplexing meaning of things in all the culture and philosophy of the ancient world, the Ethiopian had begun to seek an answer in the Scriptures of the Jews. Such, we feel, may be the background and setting of this story.

88) 8:26-40

To be hungry of heart, however, does not necessarily mean that a man will respond as a matter of course to the gospel. Seeking is not finding, and often falls short of it because it is not earnest enough, and we wonder whether there may not have been some secret unwillingness of heart in the Ethiopian, notwithstanding his interest in spiritual things. For had he not been in Jerusalem, the place of revival, where God was blessing men in plenitude of grace, opening blinded eyes and turning them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan unto God? To have been in such an atmosphere and yet have missed salvation seems to argue unwillingness on his part to receive what God was eager to give him. We may never discount the natural stubbornness of the human heart. There are none so blind as those who will not see. Who can say, for example, whether Nicodemus' reaction to Jesus' words on the new birth was simple incomprehension? Or the woman of Samaria's to the word about living water? May they not have seen something, however dimly, the implications of which they were unwilling to face? How often this is the truth about our lack of understanding of the things of God. We are not prepared for the revolution that 'seeing' involves.

89) 8:26-40

The narrative of the man's encounter with Philip is highly dramatic and full of significance as illustrating the logic of conversion. We may recall what was said in an earlier Note (on Acts 2:13 ff) that in the apostolic teaching there was a twofold emphasis, on the Scriptures and on Christ. We find the same here. The man was studying the Scriptures, and in them he found Christ. It is very wonderful to see how the living Christ laid hold upon him. He did not say, 'What does this mean?', for it was no intellectual problem that he was facing. He said, in effect, 'Who is this Man?' He was arrested by the Christ of the Scriptures, the Man of Calvary (Isa 53). It is interesting to see which verses of that great Messianic chapter had gripped him. The RSV translates 33, 'In his humiliation justice was denied him', and it would seem that the thought of the Innocent One suffering and being denied justice haunted him. It was Philip's great privilege to expound to him the truth of the gospel, that Christ suffered the Just for the unjust that He might bring us to God. Whatever resistance there may have been in his heart was now broken down by the power of dying love, and hindrances are swept away as his heart opened to the truth of God (35).

90) 8:26-40

A threefold progression may be noted here which is basic in the idea of conversion. In the first place there was the appeal to the man's mind. 'Understandest thou what thou readest?' This should be remembered when criticisms are levelled against evangelical witness because of its so-called emotional appeal. It is also a pointer to us as to how we should go about the business of seeking to win men for Christ. The truth of God must be presented to their minds in the first instance, and we believe there is a certain minimal amount of truth that a man must grasp before he can have any true experience of grace. Next, when the truth is grasped by the mind, the heart is awakened by its power, and stirred and moved, as the Ethiopian's obviously was (34). This is a necessary and indispensable part of religious experience. Nor is there harm attached to it, inasmuch as emotion is an essential ingredient of human experience. It is only when emotions are stirred apart from the opening and illumination of the mind that danger arises. Finally, the will is bent and subdued and brought into captivity to the will of God. This is the central citadel which must capitulate and learn a new obedience, and everything in gospel endeavour is ultimately to be directed to this end. When a man comes to the point where there are no more hindrances in him (36), the battle for his soul is won, and he enters into the kingdom of God. Thus it was with the Ethiopian, and thus it must be with each and all of us.

91) 8:26-40

In the first Note on this passage we spoke of the Ethiopian's probable intellectual and cultural background, and suggested that it is generally in an intellectual milieu, where people think, that the dilemma of man presents itself in its most acute and poignant form. It is doubtless true that such people are on a particular wavelength; all the same you do not need to be an intellectual or cultural giant to be able to help such people. The way some people talk you would think that unless you had read all the existentialist literature of the day you did not have a hope of speaking to our modern generation. Well, Philip the Evangelist, bless him, had probably never heard of the Augustan poets or the glories of Greek culture, yet he led this man to Christ. It is good, of course, if we are able to speak on the cultural or intellectual wavelength, but we should remember that it is possible to lead men to Christ even if we have not read a word of Sartre or Becket or Camus, provided we have read Christ and know Him as a living Saviour in our lives. And for this reason: Basically, all men's needs are the same, and all men's problem is the same. Man is man in revolt, whether intellectual or not, in revolt against his destiny in the mind and purpose of God; and in this realm no man can say, 'I am not as other men are'. All must come into the kingdom in the same way and on the same terms. And the supreme need is to be able to point the way, clearly and plainly, that men may enter in.

92) 9:1-9

We come now to the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, the man who under God has meant more to the Christian faith than any other in history. There are good grounds for saying that his arrest on the Damascus Road was a direct consequence of Stephen's martyrdom - he was obviously a conscience-stricken man (5), and that conscience must have been unendurably wounded at the sight of Stephen's death (7-58). It is ever true to say that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church. Suffering for Christ's sake is never in vain.

We should note, by way of introduction, the quality of the people being touched by the gospel in those wonderful days of the early Church. Barnabas was, it would seem, a landed aristocrat; the Ethiopian was a man of eminence, a high-ranking statesman; Saul of Tarsus was a brilliant Jewish scholar, one of the finest and acutest intellects of the ancient world. It is sometimes averred that the Christian faith is not acceptable intellectually, but the history of the early Church gives the lie to such a notion. It is not said that 'not many wise men' become Christians, but 'not many wise men after the flesh'. It is not intellect, but pride of intellect, that constitutes the stumbling-block in so many intellectuals. The need of the Church at this time of change and development was for a leader to express the breadth of the gospel and its universality, and for an intellect that was at home in the atmosphere of Greek culture and civilisation and able to expose its weaknesses and failures. And the need of the hour was matched by the divine provision. God had His man ready.

93) 9:1-9

The word 'yet' in 1 is marvellously graphic. In spite of the revival movement in Jerusalem, in spite of that tremendous day in the Sanhedrin when Stephen devastated him with unanswerable logic in the Scriptures, in spite of the unforgettable scene when Stephen was murdered, in spite of the anguished torment of his stricken conscience - yet he went on persecuting the Church of God. It is obvious that a crisis was bound to develop sooner or later, and one can well imagine how the tension mounted. Saul was a deeply religious man, a serious thinker. He had prided himself on his religious attainments. His resentment must have been profound when these 'unlearned and ignorant men' came preaching Christ crucified and risen and calling for repentance and faith in Him as the only way of reconciliation with God. Is it reading too much into the story to suggest that there may have come a moment when Saul suddenly became terribly afraid that their gospel was true? This is a truly shattering experience! The whole background of a lifetime, the entire framework of his religious life called in question and, worse still, his own mind secretly assenting to the irresistible logic of the apostolic message with its emphasis on the fulfilment of the Scriptures. It was appealing terribly to his intellect, and it was all very frightening! No wonder there was a conflict in his soul. No wonder his heart and conscience were deeply disturbed. As Jesus said, it was hard for him!

94) 9:1-9

Saul of Tarsus is not the only one who has been troubled and disturbed by the message of the gospel. We in Scotland have also lived through a time of misunderstanding of the Scriptures, when the true gospel of grace has been eclipsed and when at last it is proclaimed in the tradition and urgency of the apostles, men ask, 'Can it be this message which lays such an emphasis on sin and salvation, repentance and re-birth is the only true message of the gospel? Can it be that all along we have been wrong? It is inevitable that such mental and spiritual conflict should arise after a time of confusion and misunderstanding. The great danger however is that men should simply refuse to face up to the implications of doctrines that disturb them. There are those who insist that religion shall be a comfortable thing even at the expense of truth. At all costs their peace of mind must not be disturbed. But this is to live in a world of unreality from which there will be an abrupt and terrible awakening on the Day of Judgment. Far better for the disturbance to come now, and our souls led into the true peace of God, than to remain in a state of false security and comfort until it is too late and find ourselves in the wrong with God forever.

95) 9:1-9

Saul's words in 6 indicate the yielding of his will to the Son of God, and all his striving ceased. Nothing could indicate more clearly that conversion means the beginning of a new obedience and submission to Christ, and we should see that this is the heart of the experience on the Damascus Road, not the spectacular manifestations that accompanied it; a moral revolution, rather than emotional or mystical. The Lord's 'Arise' was a royal command and is analogous to the ceremony sometimes performed by a reigning sovereign. Just as a man who receives the accolade kneels down as a commoner, and arises a knight of the realm, so Saul was one moment a rebel and persecutor, and the next a child of God, raised to newness of life and a bondslave of Jesus Christ. Such is the miracle and mystery of regeneration. As instant and immediate as that! Thus completely and permanently can one's life be changed by the grace of God and the power of the living Christ. Saul of Tarsus became Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles. He was never the same again.

96) 9:1-9

A remarkable contrast is presented in 7,8. It is said both of Saul and of the men that were with him that they saw no man, but an infinity of difference lies between the two.

Saul's companions were passed over in this Divine visitation and no sense of destiny seems to have touched their hearts. This happens so often in Christian experience. A man may be sitting in Church and be passing from death to life under the mighty operation of the Spirit of God, while the person next to him yawns in boredom, blinded by the god of this world and knowing not the time of their visitation. The Word of salvation may be nigh them, but they are slumbering in the sleep of death.

Saul's, on the other hand, was the blindness of grace, and the experience that overtook him on the Damascus Road blinded his eyes for ever more to anything but Christ and the glories of the gospel. No words could express more worthily what his conversion did for him. This also is a hall-mark of a true work of grace in the soul, and we should examine our own experience in the light of it to see whether our 'sight' has been similarly affected. How much do we see besides the risen and glorified Saviour?

97) 9:10-22

The words spoken by our Lord to Ananias show us something of the significance of conversion from the divine, as distinct from the human, point of view. In the first place, the important thing to Christ was that Saul had become a praying man (11). All his life he had said prayers, but now he prayed, and it meant that fellowship with God had been established, and that for which he had been created had now at last begun to be realised. This is further emphasised in the words in 15, 'He is a chosen vessel unto Me'. Our election in grace is not primarily to service, although service will always necessarily flow from it, but to fellowship with the Lord. He has made us for Himself, and our true destiny is fulfilled only in this way. Still more striking is the word in 16 about suffering for His Name's sake. Saul was being called to a life of costly testimony. This is very different from the all-too prevalent modern doctrine of 'Come to Christ and be happy'. We have only to remember the apostle's experience in later life to realise how true this prophecy was for him. Prayer, fellowship, suffering - these are the things that are important to the Lord in a man's conversion. Do they figure prominently and significantly in ours?

98) 9:10-22

We may interpret 20 as the cries of the newborn soul, and there is something very moving about the first acts of witness borne to a new-found salvation. The verse is sometimes quoted to support the contention that as soon as men become Christians they ought to engage in active service for the Lord, but we need to compare Scripture with Scripture in this matter and learn that in fact the newly converted Saul did not continue to witness, but was led of the Spirit into Arabia (see Gal 1:16-18) where he spent long months brooding upon the amazing experience that had overtaken him and thinking out its implications. It is impressive to realise that fourteen years were to pass before he was commissioned and thrust out by the Spirit into missionary work. God takes time to prepare His workmen, and we fear that many a promising servant of Christ is spoiled and rendered ineffective before ever his real life's work begins by premature and over-eager incursions into the work of the gospel. Not for nothing does Paul later say, 'The love of Christ constraineth us' – the word means not 'to drive on' but 'to hold in'. It was the constraint of Christ's love that kept him back for long years until. God's time came. Then he worked to some purpose. So it was with John the Baptist, who was in the deserts until the day of his appearing to Israel. We should not jump too readily to the conclusion that the right and obvious thing to do is to go forth. The main emphasis of Scripture is all against this. Even the sight of fields white unto harvest does not constitute an indication that we should go out, according to Christ. He did not then say to the disciples, 'Go ye therefore....' but 'Pray ye therefore....' How careful we should be to seek the mind of the Spirit!

99) 9:23-31

Commentators are in fact sharply divided as to how to interpret the chronology of Paul's experience. Some take the view that the bulk of the three years (mentioned in Gal 1:18) between his conversion and his visit to Jerusalem was spent in Damascus, and others that the time was spent in Arabia. Our own view is that the visit to Arabia took place between verses 21 and 22 here, and that it was an extended one, during which time he came to grips with the implications of the gospel. Alford maintains that it is this that would explain the accession of power mentioned in 22. To complete the picture, after his visit to Jerusalem (26-29) he departed to Tarsus (30), and we hear little more of him for a number of years, possibly as many as ten, called by the scholars 'the silent years', before he was thrust forth by the Holy Spirit in Acts 13 (AD 47/48). But, even conceding that the purpose of these silent years was to enable him to grapple with the message that had laid hold on him, why Arabia? Some think this refers to the desert land east of Damascus, but there is really nothing to suggest that it was not much further south that he went, and it is likely that it was so for this reason: One has only to think of the strong element of symbolism in the Scriptures, and of the significance of places therein, to realise that Arabia would have an especial significance for Saul of Tarsus. For Arabia was steeped in historic association for the people of God. It was there that Moses the man of God had himself been prepared and trained for some forty years by God, before being sent to Pharaoh, king of Egypt, with the command, 'Let My people go'. And it was there also that Paul came to understand the nature of the commission that the Risen Christ had given him on the Damascus Road, 'to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins'. It was a new 'Let My people go', in the spiritual realm. More of this in tomorrow's Note.

100) 9:23-31

It was in Arabia that the Moses of the Old Testament was prepared for his life's work, there that he saw the burning bush, there that the constraint of Divine love came upon him; and it was there also that the Moses of the New Testament, Paul the Apostle, was prepared, seeing the same glory, meeting with the God of the Bush, and being gripped by the same Divine love. It was there that Moses later received the Law, and it was there that Paul received the gospel. Not only so: Paul would review the whole Old Testament revelation in the light of the new thing that had happened to him. He would require to re-interpret the whole of the Jewish religion in the light of Christ.

But there was another significance in Arabia; another Old Testament figure had frequented that Place, Elijah. After the spectacular battle with the prophets of Baal on Carmel, Elijah had fled to Horeb (Sinai), and there the still small voice had spoken to him. God had spoken in the earthquake to Paul, and how he needed the still small voice to minister to him and to instruct him in the way that he should go. As Alexander Whyte says: 'Paul went down to Arabia with Moses and the prophets in his knapsack, and came back with Romans and Ephesians and Colossians in his mouth and in his heart!'

101) 9:23-31

So much, then, for Arabia; now let us think of Damascus. It was not long before Paul began to prove in his experience the meaning of the words spoken by the Risen Lord to Ananias of him, 'I will show him how great things he must suffer for My name's sake' (16). For his preaching in Damascus aroused the bitter anger and enmity of his erstwhile colleagues, the Jews, and they sought to kill him. And there is recorded for us the account of how he escaped with his life from the walls of Damascus (23-25). This episode he includes himself in the catalogue of his sufferings in 2 Cor 11:23-33. It is very wonderful, and a glorious testimony to the power of divine grace, that the very men he first came to Damascus to persecute and kill were those who enabled him to escape capture and certain death himself. We should note the contrasts - the abundance of revelations in Arabia, and the indignity of such an escape from evil men in Damascus.

'It is the way the Master went,
Should not the servant tread it still?

102) 9:23-31

It is perhaps natural that Saul should have been regarded with some suspicion by the disciples at Jerusalem, for had he not been the chief persecutor of the Church? He might well have been in a difficult and embarrassing position had it not been for Barnabas who, true to his reputation as the son of consolation, the man who could be counted upon to stand by in time of need, espoused his cause and commended him to the Church. This incident is very revealing and shows how important it is to have a spirit of discernment. Barnabas obviously had a breadth of vision that enabled him to see that something of far-reaching significance had taken place on the Damascus Road, and that here was a man who was destined to do great things in the kingdom of God. It is a great ministry to be giving help and encouragement to such people, to see the possibilities in them when as yet very little of the shape of things to come is there at all. To believe in someone's future is to make one very patient towards all the mistakes and failures he may make in his years of preparation, and willing to make allowances with regard to the many rough edges that have to be made smooth. Many a man who has left his mark on the life of the Church can look back and realise how much he has owed to the wise and sympathetic understanding some discerning father in the faith has shown him. Many more perhaps might be helped to maturity of character if more took the trouble to look beyond the surface to the real heart and core of some of the young believers with whom we have to do. Oh for wisdom and compassionate discernment! Lord, open Thou mine eyes!

103) 9:23-31.

The description of the character of Saul's ministry in Jerusalem is significant. We read in 29 that he 'disputed against the Grecians'. The import of this is that he proceeded to do what Stephen had done and was doing when he was martyred. The 'Grecians' here should be understood as Greek-speaking Jews (as in 6:1, 9). In other words, he was standing in for Stephen, making amends and restitution, so far as he was able, for the work that he had caused to cease by his complicity in the death of Stephen - doing it moreover in the full knowledge that it might cost him his life, as it had Stephen's. This is wonderful, and some indication of the depth of his learning the gospel in Arabia - learning that he had no right to be alive at all (cf 2 Cor 5: 14, 'we thus judge...'); a realisation that he had been saved, for service or for sacrifice. But, as we see from Acts 22:17-21, the sacrifice, offered, was not accepted, and he was reserved for service. But what a way to live! Does discipleship mean this to us? God sometimes needs both service and sacrifice for a testimony to His grace (cf idea of scapegoat in the Old Testament ritual: one goat slain, the other sent out to wander, one a literal sacrifice, the other a living sacrifice).

104) 9:31

The immediate result of Paul's conversion was that the Churches had rest from persecution - throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria. Not only had the fires of persecution not destroyed the Church, but on the contrary, through the sovereignty of God at work in it all, it was multiplied - from which we may gather that 'rest' in its biblical meaning has little suggestion of inertness or inactivity. There was an edifying work going on, and this can be taken in two different, though related, senses. The primary agent in the building up of believers is the ministry of the Word, and we doubt not that this went on at depth all the while, but persecution can also be the 'word' of the Lord to His people, and there can be little doubt that the fires of these days of testing 'did' something to them, imparting a depth of character and steadfastness to them as few other things could. Tribulation, Paul was to teach much later in Romans 5, worketh character. In a living church, God never leaves Himself without the means of purifying and strengthening of His children. It was the edification of the Church in this twofold sense that led, through walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, to the multiplication referred to at the end of the verse. The word 'walking' here has been given the meaning of 'going on its way', and this is a graphic way of describing the situation. The Church, in fact, was marching on, and a forward marching Church always multiplies itself. This is the true evangelism - the natural, inevitable self-propagation of a living organism - the increase of the Body, as Paul himself was to describe it later, in his letter to the Ephesians (4:16). Oh for such evangelism today!

105) 9:32-43

The saints at Lydda and Joppa were probably the fruit of Philip's ministry. The two towns were situated between Azotus and Caesarea, and had doubtless been evangelised during his journey from the south after his encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch (8:40). The healing of Aeneas is only the second miracle of this nature recorded as having been performed by the apostles. On this occasion there could be no manner of doubt as to the source of the healing, as there seems to have been in the case of the man at the temple gate (3:12). Peter's words were simple and unequivocal, 'Jesus Christ maketh thee whole', and what wonderful music they make to our ears as we read them! The raising of Dorcas is very striking. It was one thing for the disciples to heal the sick as their Master had done, but raising the dead! -well, that was surely beyond all expectation. But Jesus had said, 'Greater things than these shall ye do', and perhaps the news of Aeneas's healing had encouraged the saints at Joppa to hope for the impossible. At all events there must have been an extraordinary constraint in Peter's spirit to put the mourners out of the room and kneel down and pray. Was there a conviction in his heart from the Lord that a miracle would be performed, and did he seek confirmation of this in prayer? His actions were very reminiscent of Christ's when He raised Jairus' daughter, and even the words he used were similar. 'Talitha cumi', said Jesus to the little girl. 'Tabitha arise' said Peter. The earlier miracle must certainly have been in his mind, and this should encourage us in our own experience. What He has done in the past He can surely do again, and we may lean with confidence on His faithful promises. He is the same yesterday, and today, and forever.

106) 9:32-43

It is always legitimate to look at the healing miracles as parables of grace - we have New Testament warrant for doing so - and these recorded here afford graphic lessons both about the nature of man's need and the glory of the gospel. For one thing, the paralysis that had afflicted Aeneas for eight years is a picture of the enslaving power of sin in a man's life. To be a sinner means to be no longer able to extricate oneself from one's plight - not indeed in the sense that reformation is never possible, for it is, and can sometimes go quite a long way, but in the end it is still true that man is unable not to be a sinner. This is his imprisonment. He has no way back into the presence and favour of God. But Aeneas's plight also illustrates the sickness of contemporary society, restless, adrift, with no sure anchorage, relentlessly carried forward by the march of events, afraid, apprehensive and beset with meaninglessness of life, and unable to extricate itself from its toils. This is the impotence in the life of man, for which there is no human remedy. The miracle of Dorcas' raising from the dead illustrates another aspect of man's predicament: he is dead in trespasses and sins. This does not mean that the spiritual element in man is simply obscured or hidden, as if all that was required was a set of propitious circumstances to bring it out again and allow it to assert itself; it means that it is not there. Life is lacking, and therefore life needs to be imparted. And the glory of the gospel is that it imparts life to the spiritually dead, and makes men whole.

107) 10:1-8

We come now to one of the most decisive chapters in Acts. It records the opening of the door of grace to the Gentiles. Cornelius was a Roman, and an 'adherent' of the Jewish synagogue, as the phrase 'one that feared God' is meant to indicate. He was one of many earnest, thoughtful men who were attracted to the moral integrity of Judaism in contrast to the debased mystery religions round about them. His heart was surely prepared by the secret operation of the Spirit of God for all that was to happen that day. One is prompted to wonder whether he was meditating or in prayer when he saw the vision (3), seeking for light and asking himself, 'What am I to do?' This would explain the angel's statement to him that his alms were come up for a memorial before God. It does not mean that he was to receive the gift of salvation because he was, as we would say, 'a deserving case' - there are no deserving cases in the sight of God, all have sinned and come short of His glory - but rather that having been faithful to the light he had, more was now to be given him. Jesus said, 'To him that hath it shall be given'. This gives us, at least in part, the answer to the vexed question of what happens to those who do not have the gospel. Do they die without hope if they have not heard of Christ? What we must ask is, 'Have they responded to what light they have had?' There is in fact a (preparatory) revelation given to all men, in nature and through conscience, and this is true of the remotest tribes on the earth as it was true of the Roman centurion. The quality of his life (2) makes it evident that he had made the most of the light that had come his way and was now, so to speak, ready for the next step.

108) 10:9-23

In the meanwhile, Peter was also in prayer. We wonder whether he in turn was seeking guidance, in view of the way things were developing in the Church. The signs are not wanting to indicate that he was finding it very difficult to grasp the idea that any outside Jewry were included in the embrace of the gospel, and the conversion of the Samaritans and, latterly, the Ethiopian, must have raised problems in a mind that was so loyal to the idea that the Jews, and none other, were the people of God. It was to change this attitude that the vision was given him. It is a sobering thought that God needed to give a special revelation to the apostle in order to make him usable in His hands for the blessing of this Gentile. It may well be that this is an area of experience in believers in which there is sometimes a block, a falling down, an insensitiveness to the divine dealing, which leads to the failure to be ready for the opportunities that present themselves for fruitful contact. And hungry, longing souls are left in their hunger and longing. God meant them to be helped, but we were not ready. We should learn to see God's providential dealings with us in this light, and recognise that He may be intent on teaching and equipping us for possible service.

109) 10:9-23

If our interpretation of Peter's experience at this point is correct, we may learn that visions are not indicative of an advanced state of communion with God, any more than working of miracles. The vision was given him because nothing else seemed likely to convince him that the Gentiles were to be admitted to the Church of God. There was a spiritual obtuseness in him caused, it is to be feared, by ingrained religious prejudice. It was this that rendered him virtually incapable of discerning the divine strategy in this new forward movement. Even when the truth dawned on him, how slowly and tardily his mind yielded to the idea, But the evidence that this was from God was too strong to be denied, for the testimony of the Spirit in his heart was added to the word in the vision, and the providential circumstances of the coming of Cornelius' servants to enquire for him sealed the matter. Peter went off with them, and the drama began to unfold. As a lesson in divine guidance, the circumstances of his going are not without instruction for us. When something supernatural or unusual, that purports to be of God, comes to us, we should expect it to be confirmed by the inward testimony of the Spirit and outward circumstances, and we shall be wise to wait until such confirmation comes before committing ourselves to a course of action which, in default of that confirmation, might well prove to be disastrous. We are to try the spirits, whether they are of God, and this is one of the ways to do it.

110) 10:24-33

One is conscious of a sense of destiny in the description of the scene in Cornelius' house as Peter arrives. The centurion has expectantly gathered all his kinsmen and near friends for the occasion, and one cannot help marvelling at this faith. God could not but honour such an attitude. Peter (somewhat portentously?) tells the company of his vision and how it left him free to come into the company of Gentiles, and Cornelius narrates with solemnity his own similar experience four days previously. The word 'immediately' in 33 expresses the nature of his expectancy. For him there was no time to be lost - as indeed there never is, in the day of God's visitation - and in words charged with urgency he acknowledged that they were gathered in the presence of God to hear His word. Never could Peter have had a more eager or attentive audience, or preached to more responsive hearts! What a lesson for us today! It is sometimes said that in our Presbyterian form of worship the congregation does not have sufficient opportunity to take part in the service. But this is the part that all congregations may take - if they will - to listen with a sense of being in the presence of God, and to hear the message as something given and commanded by God. We venture to think that there would be more 'signs following' the preaching of the Word if there were more listening of this sort. Well might Jesus say, 'Take heed how ye hear'?

iii) 10:24-33

Let us pause for a moment to consider a question of interpretation that necessarily arises in the story. The opening verses of the chapter disclose facts about Cornelius that might tempt us to assume that, being a devout and religious man, he was a believer in the true sense of the word. We would then have to interpret what happened to him as something additional to, and other than, receiving the gift of salvation. But this would certainly be to misunderstand the whole story, for later, in the next chapter, Peter himself interprets what happened in terms of 'receiving the word of God' (11:1) and of 'granting them repentance unto life' (11:18). Furthermore, Cornelius's account of what the angel said to him (11:14) puts this matter beyond doubt; 'Call for...Peter, who shall tell thee words, whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved'. The coming of the Holy Spirit upon Cornelius and his household, therefore, can be understood only as the initial work of grace whereby they were incorporated into Christ and brought into the kingdom of God. This carries with it an interesting corollary: if we are to interpret what happened to Cornelius here as his conversion, then Peter's words in 11:15, 'as on us at the beginning' oblige us to take the experience of the apostles on the day of Pentecost as their conversion too, properly understood. This bears out the value of comparing Scripture with Scripture in questions that have often been given very different answers.

112) 10:34-43

This is one of the most important passages in the whole of Acts in that it unfolds the pattern of the apostolic proclamation of the gospel. A careful study of it will show that all their preaching follows more or less this outline, in greater or less detail. Indeed, we can go as far as to say that the gospel writers themselves have taken this as the framework of their records, and we see this particularly, as the scholars have pointed out, in Mark.

Notice the phrase, 'The word which God sent' in 36. Peter is referring to the word of life and salvation, the word of hope spoken from on high to mankind. We recall the thrill of the opening words of the epistle to the Hebrews, 'God...hath spoken unto us by His Son'. Here we see what that word of salvation is, a message concerning the life, ministry, death, resurrection and promised coming again of Christ. This, affirm the Scriptures, constitutes the 'work' of Christ, and it is on the basis of that work that forgiveness is proclaimed through His Name. There is, we should note, an essential simplicity and directness about such preaching, yet it contains all the depth of the mystery of God - God manifest in the flesh, at work in grace for us men and for our salvation. If this be the message that wins men to faith in Christ, ought it not to be our message and pattern also - our only message and pattern - in an age which is dying for want of a sure word to heal its woe?

113) 10:34-43

It is important for us to discern the threefold form and development of what Peter said. First of all, he gave the historical facts about Christ, His anointing, His public ministry, His death and rising again. This is the basis of all. The Christian Faith is a historic faith, based on history. But there is no saving virtue in believing the facts of history as such. Something else is necessary. Some assessment of the significance of these facts of history is necessary, and it is this that Peter does here. It is the apostolic interpretation of the facts that makes them into a gospel, and this is what faith is summoned to grasp and to commit itself to. Faith in His finished work as an atonement for sin - this is what lies at the heart of the gospel. Faith in Christ is faith in what He has done, and believing in Him is trusting in this and committing oneself so utterly to it that all is lost if it be not true. As the Shorter Catechism puts it, we 'receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation'. Then - and as a result of the foregoing - the gospel becomes a reality in a man's heart and life, and he enters into its blessings and joys. The fact of history, the fact for faith, and the fact in experience. This is how the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit of God takes place in a human heart - the application of the saving work of Christ to the soul, making it real. This is what happened to Cornelius and his household. As Luke puts it in 44, 'While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them that heard the word'.

114) 10:44-48

Even as Peter spoke, the Spirit of God came upon them. How are we actually to understand this? We need not suppose that any spectacular manifestation took place - that is not the essential thing about the coming of the Spirit - but rather that while Peter was unfolding to them the message of the gospel, an inner persuasion of its truth gripped their hearts, illumining their minds and empowering their wills, mastering them for Christ. It was God Who commanded the light to shine out of darkness that shined in their hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. This is the living proof that the message Peter proclaimed was with power, and it should encourage us to hope for a similar effect when we make it our concern to preach the same message.

Two things in particular should be noted. In 44, the phrase 'these words...the Word' has a deep significance. It means that in the words Peter spoke the Word of God was heard. God spoke through him and through his message in such a way that his words became, so to speak, the Word of life to Cornelius and his household. This is a truth that could be dangerously abused, but it is safeguarded if we remember that it is true only when the message preached is in accordance with the testimony of Scripture, and the man who preaches it under the control and direction of the Holy Spirit. Given these two conditions, his 'words' became the vehicle of the divine Word. The second thing to note is that here reception of the Spirit was at conversion. It was their new birth by the Spirit that took place that day. Baptism followed, as the seal that a glorious work of grace had been wrought in their lives.

115) 10:44-48

May we add one further comment on this chapter before turning to the next? The fact that it was even as Peter was preaching to them that the Spirit of God came upon them indicates that the gospel is not merely the story of what Christ has done, the narrative of what He has done, it is also, and supremely, the power of God unto salvation. It is the message itself that is the vehicle of divine virtue and power to the souls of men. And virtue comes in the preaching of the Word; the Word, the preaching, is the 'bridge' over which grace and power 'come' to men for salvation. 'Faith cometh by hearing'. It is this fact that really excludes human wisdom and oratory - 'excellency of speech' - as being irrelevant in the work of the gospel. If the gospel were only the story of what Christ has done, then oratorical excellence might well be a crucial consideration, with style and presentation paramount. But it is so much more than this; the message is not merely attended by the power of God, it is the power of God. And to preach it is to let loose among men an incalculable and incredible divine energy. As Calvin puts it, 'Preaching is....as much the Word of God as if men heard the very words pronounced by God Himself'.

116) 11:1-18

The opening verses of the chapter give some indication of the tension and strain within the Church on the matter of the admission of the Gentiles. Peter was hard put to defend himself against the charge brought against him by the Jewish Christians, the 'circumcision' party (this, incidentally, should re-inforce us in the conviction that Peter was not regarded in any way as the head of the Church at Jerusalem. The Roman Catholics' claim that he was has no foundation in Scripture). He rehearsed, however, his experience in the house of Cornelius, and this seems to have convinced his critics. This is important, for it shows that they were at least prepared to be convinced, and to receive the idea of a new development in the life of the Church. The real danger in the Christian life arises when men's minds are so closed by blind prejudice that they are not prepared to be convinced by any kind of evidence put before them. This is to sin against the Holy Spirit and to hinder and limit His working, and Christ's cause has suffered - and His work has withered - in communities and fellowships where strongly entrenched prejudice has been mistaken for true conviction, and minds have not been prepared to give the Spirit the freedom He desires and demands. You cannot imprison the Holy Spirit in a narrow, hidebound system; to try to do so, consciously or unconsciously, is to grieve Him away. He withdraws, and a glory departs with Him.

117) 11:19-30

There are several very fruitful thoughts in this passage. Let us look first of all at 21. It is wonderful, and also mysterious, to think that in the word of preaching the hand of the Lord should come upon men's lives. If this were remembered more, what a spirit of expectancy it would engender in our worship. We have already commented (see Note on 10:24-33) on the contention that congregations do not have enough part to play in worship, but this is to misunderstand the real meaning and purpose of our coming together. The part we must all play, preacher and hearer alike, is to wait expectantly on the Lord in His Word, and this is an active exercise of faith which involves a high degree of spiritual concentration. Any preacher can tell when a congregation is responsive to his message, and the knowledge that they are enables him to give of his best, with the resultant appropriation of the Lord's blessing. In this sense, a Church service ought to be one of the most thrilling things on earth, not in the sense of high-pitched emotion or excitement, which can often detract from true worship, but in the sense of being charged with spiritual dynamic. To be in touch with the living and true God is a vibrant and re-vitalising experience!

118) 11:19-30

The description of Barnabas' ministry in 22ff is very beautiful. It is said that he 'saw' the grace of God, and it is well that we should be reminded that grace is something that becomes visible in lives that are changed and transformed by the power of the gospel, not merely a part of the religious jargon that men oft despise as being irrelevant to modern life. This is the point about the name given to the disciples at Antioch. The word 'Christian' was used indeed as a term of reproach and contempt, but the fact remains that they were living such a distinctive kind of life that a new word had to be coined to describe them. We read once a letter in the editorial columns of a newspaper which criticised the lives of Christians as being on the whole 'neither morally nor intellectually on a higher level than those of unbelievers with whom they are so easily confused'. But wherever the grace of God becomes visible in men's lives the very opposite is the case, and unbelievers are obliged to acknowledge, however grudgingly, that something has made them different. This does not mean that believers should consciously strive to be different, for this leads to unnaturalness which is the very antithesis of true Christian experience. Unselfconsciousness should be the hallmark of true spiritual testimony, and if the Spirit is having His way in our lives we will not have to try to be anything - we will be, inevitably, whatever it is His pleasure to make us. This was proved by the early Church, and it is still what tells today.

119) 11:19-30

We continue with Barnabas' ministry. 'He exhorted them', we read. The word used is the same as that which describes his character in 4:36 - 'the son of consolation' - and refers to his ability to 'stand in with' people, to help them in their need. Nothing could describe more aptly his ministry to the Christians at Antioch. What he said to them is what needs to be said to all young Christians - that 'with purpose of heart they should cleave unto the Lord'. The 'purpose of heart' he refers to is that resoluteness which engages the will to be the Lord's. The Psalmist expresses this thought when he says 'My heart is fixed' (see also Daniel 1:8). 'Heart' in Scripture is a comprehensive term, embracing the whole man, mind, affections and will. Nor is the phrase 'cleave unto the Lord' less important, for it tells us that the heart of the Christian experience is not the acceptance of certain doctrines or a system of teaching merely, but fellowship with the Lord. And there is no doubt that Barnabas' own life showed forth in practice the advice he gave them. The sheer goodness of the man (24) and his Spirit-filled ministry were an eloquent testimony to the fruitfulness of a life that cleaved to the Lord with purpose of heart. This is the secret source of every grace in the Christian life. Well would it be for the Church if there were more of Barnabas' spirit, and more to follow his counsel!

120) 11:25-30

The last few verses of the chapter are full of interest. Barnabas went off to Tarsus to find Saul. Why should this be recorded here? May it not be that, having seen the critical new developments in the Church's witness among the Gentiles, he realised something of the strategy of the Spirit and perceived the significance of Saul's conversion in relation to the mighty work that was about to begin - the great outreach of the gospel to all the nations of the earth - and recognized that here was a man of sufficient breadth of vision to lead the forward movement worthily. One commentator points out that the word 'seek' in 25 implies arduous search. Barnabas scoured Tarsus until the apostle to the Gentiles was found. Back in Antioch they taught together in the fellowship of the believers for a year, establishing them in grace and - what was perhaps even more important - being prepared in that very work for the much greater work that lay hidden in the future for them. God has His own ways of preparing men for their life's work. In the divine economy no opportunity for training is wasted.

The prophecy of Agabus introduces another of the several glimpses we have in the New Testament into the financial affairs of the early Church. We should note that there was no appeal for funds on this occasion. The consciousness of the need was sufficient to prompt the saints to give - not token givings either, but each according to his ability. The Holy Spirit spoke to their hearts through the need that had arisen, and they were instantly responsive to His voice. From which we may learn that when men's hearts are obedient to the voice of the Spirit the question of funds looks after itself. The financial problems facing the Church today have, like the others, a spiritual root.

121) 12:1-5

This striking and dramatic chapter is important from several points of view. For one thing, it records the last mention of Peter in the story of the early Church, and he now hereafter makes way for Paul to take the centre of the stage. For another thing, it is the chapter which immediately precedes the story of the great missionary expansion of the Church and the carrying of the gospel to the lands of the Gentiles. It records the final rejection, so to speak, by the Jewish people of the gospel - Pharisees, Sadducees, the people, and now the king of the Jews, Herod himself. The Jews 'judge themselves unworthy of everlasting life' (13:46), and now the gospel goes to the Gentiles. The chapter also demonstrates the futility of the opposition of the evil one against the spread of the gospel; here we have one culmination of the battle, and what we see at the end of the chapter is the gospel going forward unhindered. 'Like a mighty army moves the Church of God' - how true these words are of the early days of Church history, and if the essential simplicities and single-heartedness that characterised the first disciples marked our own lives - especially the spirit of prayer (5) - they would be true of us too. And surely this is something that lies with us?

122) 12:1-5

The Herod in this passage was a grandson of the Herod who murdered the children during the infancy of our Lord, and a nephew of the Herod who killed John the Baptist - from which we may gather that evil, as well as good, extends its influence beyond its own generation. No one lives unto himself. It may be truer than we realise that a man may by his evil life set a pattern of behaviour for his posterity.

The circumstances of this act of persecution raise a perplexing question in our minds. James was martyred - this was his fiery baptism (Mark 10:39) - but Peter was delivered. Why should this be? Was the one more important than the other? One can only bow in humble submission before the sovereignty of God in this and acknowledge that His ways are past finding out. There can be no question of thinking that the powers of darkness stole an unexpected triumph over the living God, for all evil is in His control. What happened did so with the full cognizance of the Lord, but the reasons for it are locked up in the secret counsel of His will. The all-important verse is 5 - 'but prayer was made without ceasing of the Church unto God for him'. This is the only explanation of all that follows. In any time of crisis, however severe the opposition from evil men and Satan himself, God will be glorified in it if only it is met by prayer. This is as true in personal life as it is in the corporate experience of the Church, and when we take God's sovereignty more seriously than we sometimes do we shall learn to view such extremities not as unrelieved disasters but as opportunities of grace.

123) 12:6-12

There are two wonderful answers to prayer recorded in these verses, and we should not miss the less obvious in our pre-occupation with the other. That Peter should on the eve of his execution be sleeping peacefully like a little child argues a detachment that we feel could have come only by the power of prayer. Can this be the same man who in an earlier time of crisis thrice denied his Lord? Not that he necessarily had assurance of deliverance in the morning; he may well have accepted that a similar martyrdom to James's was inevitable. The detachment of spirit that came to him is something that is independent of any sort of circumstances. His life was hid with Christ in God, and he was in a secret place where no fear could assail his spirit. This is just as mighty a miracle as the supernatural deliverance wrought by the angel of the Lord, as mature reflection should make plain. Iron gates are more easily opened and chains burst asunder than heart-fears stilled and cowardice conquered and uprooted. What did Peter think about in prison? What were his thoughts? Did they turn to the story of Daniel in the den of lions? Did he recall the incident of Christ asleep in his fishing boat during the storm? We cannot of course know, but the encouragements of the Scriptures and of past experience are what always stand a man in good stead in time of crisis, and happy is he when the Spirit of God within him brings to his remembrance the right word at the right moment.

124) 12:6-12

This part of the story offers a superb illustration of the work of salvation in a man's soul. Wesley clearly bases one verse of his great hymn 'And can it be' on the incident recorded here:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

Here is a parable of the condition of sinful man -in prison, under sentence of death, awaiting execution, and asleep! And here is a parable of grace in the gospel, for to be saved is to be delivered out of the prison house of sin, to have the chains that bind us unloosed, and be brought out of darkness into light, and out of the bondage of Satan into the glorious liberty of the children of God. And in all this the all-important thing for us to remember is that deliverance, whether natural or spiritual, can be brought about by prayer. With a praying Church, anything can happen, and this is perhaps the greatest lesson the Church has to re-learn in our time. Until it does, our problems will remain - and multiply.

125) 12:13-19

We are both surprised and encouraged by the reaction of the disciples to Peter's appearance at the door, surprised in that such a redoubtable company should have shown such evidence of unbelief - were they not, after all, praying for God to help Peter? - and have been so slow to realise that God had indeed answered their prayers, and encouraged in that they proved to be so like ourselves, with their faith mixed with unbelief. It should comfort us to realise that God can discern real faith in our hearts, be it as small as a grain of mustard seed, and well-nigh overgrown with the weeds of unbelief, and is still prepared to honour it. The damsel Rhoda comes out best in the story, for she at least was prepared, after her initial shock and fear, to believe it was Peter who stood at the door. Her leaving him standing outside is a delightfully human touch, and reminds us that the mighty workings of the Spirit of God are not humourless, but on the contrary rich in the right sort of merriment. We may be sure that after the agony of their night vigil - the word used in 5 to describe their prayer as 'without ceasing' is one used of our Lord's agony in Gethsemane - there was much rapturous rejoicing and glad laughter. Why should holiness so often be equated with sad and lugubrious countenance?

126) 12:20-25

The judgment of Herod fulfils the apostolic warning that 'whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap', and is a reflection of the nemesis that has repeatedly come in history upon men who have exalted themselves against God. We may gather from the opening verses of the chapter, particularly 3, that Herod was essentially a scheming man. He does not appear to have been particularly anti-Christian in a positive sense. He saw that what he did pleased the Jews and, with self-advantage as the motive, he was prepared to go to considerable lengths to win further favour with them. This type of person is the most unscrupulous of all, for he will trample upon anyone that happens to be in his way, in order to gain his objective. He will change camps, change views - everything will be subordinated to the tremendous, voracious appetite within him for self-advancement. Such men are terribly dangerous for, finally, all distinctions between good and evil vanish in their minds, and they cross the deadline beyond which there is no possibility of redemption. It is a solemnising thought that the same angel of the Lord that delivered Peter laid Herod low - to the one he was a saviour of life unto life, to the other a saviour of death unto death. How important to be on the side of the angels!

127) 12:24-13:2

The thirteenth chapter of Acts brings us to a new and deeply significant development in the early Church's work. Two points here will afford a useful 'bridge' over to the outreach to the Gentiles which becomes the main theme of the book from this point onwards. On the one hand, as pointed out in an earlier Note, we see the futility and impotence of the attempt to defeat the work of the gospel. All the scheming of the powers of darkness, by whatever instrumentality, are set at nought, and at the end we are told (24) that the word of God grew and multiplied. And there is a symbolism in the words 'Barnabas and Saul fulfilled their ministry'. On the other hand, we must recall, in this connection, the Lord's words in 1:8, 'Both in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth'. This is the sovereignty that is, at work in the steady overcoming of all opposition, and the turning of it to good account. And what we see in Acts 13 is the beginning of the fulfilment of the fourth phase in our Lord's strategy for His work in the ancient world. It is against this background that we must view it.

128) 13:1-4

We have seen enough in our studies of previous chapters to realise that events were moving inexorably in an outward direction, and that there was a sense of tension, so to speak, in the early Church, a sense of crisis, a sense that it was now at a cross-roads of tremendous importance. Something, it was obvious, was in the air, and something was about to happen. There had been Stephen's teaching, and Philip's ministry, and Peter's vision, and the work among the Gentiles at Antioch. And in this curiously unsettled state, the Church was driven to prayer. Whatever was about to happen, whatever development was to take place, it was best and safest to let it be born in the prayer meeting! And born it was. As they waited, the intimation came. They were sensitive to the intimation of the Spirit, and obedient to His commands. It is not always so, either in fellowships or in individuals. There are those that know not the time of their visitation. A time of destiny may come which, if missed, may not come again. How intent we should be to have open ears and hearts to the leading of the Spirit of God, even if it means allowing Him to overturn the whole elaborate fabric of our lives for the furtherance of His will and purpose! This could be possible, however, only in a praying Church, for only in a spirit of prayer can our hearts become truly submissive to all that He says to us. The alignment of the will of the Church with the mind of the Spirit is seen in the juxtaposition of the phrases 'they sent them away' and 'being sent forth by the Holy Ghost'. We may always expect great things when there is such an identity of purpose!

129) 13:1-4

For all the tremendous surge of the forward movement that we have already seen in this book, it is difficult to avoid the conviction that it was planned expansion. It is true that Luke says that 'the disciples went everywhere preaching the word' (8:4), but it was an 'everywhere' dictated and controlled by the Spirit of God. There is restrictiveness in the expansion and in the pattern, and often smallness rather than diversity in order to attain final objectives. It seems clear that in fact strategic objectives were in view, rather than widespread and universal influence, and there was much that was left undone and untouched, in order finally to attain the goal of the strategy. What is the climax of the story of Acts? Paul in Rome. And so much was subservient to this central goal and purpose, and much work in other places was left so that this could be achieved.

This concentrated, directed witness tells a very different story from the pronounced activism that is often the accepted pattern for the Church's work today. But let us be clear about this: the early Church simply left alone some of the most urgent problems of the time. There are things which we may think it ought to have turned its attention to, but it ignored them. It had limited objectives. And this may be why it accomplished so much in such a short time. The Church today is like the knight of old who leapt on his charger and rode off furiously in all directions! Compare this concentrated, and often held-in witness in Acts with the multiplication and proliferation of organisations and movements in the life of the Church today, many of them overlapping one another, doing the same kind of job as the next one, but under a different set of initials. The very diffuseness of these movements should make us ask penetrating questions of them, and of ourselves too.

130) 13:4-13

The early stages of Paul's first missionary journey seem to set the tone of all his work in the gospel. They were full of incident and pulsating with spiritual power. It was not long before the opposition of Satan was encountered. At Paphos the apostle found spiritual hunger in the Roman deputy. But spiritual hunger attracts Satan also, and one of the problems - nay, tragedies - of our day also is that so many false sects are ever at hand to mislead and deceive those who are groping for true light. Only a ministry like Paul's is big enough to destroy their evil influence and lead men into life. Elymas the sorcerer was, it seems, an apostate Jew. An apostate is one who has turned back and fallen away from the truth, and such a one is generally far more dangerous than a rank unbeliever, and does far more harm to the cause of Christ. We can think of men who used to be upholders of conservative views of the Scriptures, for example, and do so no longer, and have been amazed at the bitterness and contempt with which they attack their former position and those who still hold to it. We can recall the case of a man whose heart-warming ministry in the gospel was said in early days to move strong men to tears, and who has since been a bitter critic of most things evangelical. Paul's words are strong but not too strong for the situation confronting him, and they were immediately ratified by the Lord. Elymas was struck blind for a season as a judgment for his sins. From which men ought to learn to fear God and fear to interfere with His work. To touch God's work and oppose His servants is to play with fire. No-one resists Him with impunity.

131) 13:4-13

Another comment on the reality of the dark powers at work in Paphos seems necessary at this point. Looking at the whole story in perspective, this first recorded incident in the outward reach of the gospel is surely symbolic, in the sense that here is a significant new beginning, a great advance of the good news into the ancient world. This was the first time the message of salvation has been proclaimed outside the borders of the Promised Land. It was now being preached in a world that was lying in the wicked one: It was said of Martin Luther,

'His soul is the battle-field of two worlds, I marvel not that he sees demons'

It is precisely when the gospel is preached most powerfully that the hostility of the powers of darkness is most violent. What was happening here was the assault of the domains of darkness by the forces of light. Every true preaching of the gospel is a challenge to the devil; the word of Christ draws him out of his hiding-place. And the powers of darkness do not abandon their claim without a struggle. Here, then, is Paul throwing down the gauntlet to the devil on the threshold of the darkness of the world. Jesus once said, 'The gates of hell shall not prevail against My Church'. We sometimes tend to take these words in a defensive sense, as if they meant that however much the powers of darkness hurled their might against the Church they would not finally harm it. This is true, of course, but what if we are meant to take Jesus' words offensively? It is the gates of hell that are being stormed by the word of the gospel. And we are given the assurance that they shall not prevail, that is, stand up against the onslaught. This is the force of the incident recorded here. The powers of darkness had begun to be spoiled, through the use of weapons that were mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds (2 Cor 10:4, 5). How heartening this must have been to Paul as a symbol of the success of the ongoing work of the gospel!

132) 13:4-13

Another fact stands out, at least by implication, in this story: the hunger of men for the word of life in the ancient world. One of the impressive things about the New Testament is the evidence it provides of so many in the Graeco-Roman world who were questing spirits, hungry of heart - the centurion in the gospels, Cornelius, the Greeks at Athens, and here, the Roman pro-consul at Paphos. One of the commentators refers to an inscription found in Cyprus with the words

Thou, the one God,
The greatest, the most glorious name,
Help us all, we beseech Thee.

We may compare this with the inscription on the altar at Athens, 'To the unknown God', as a parallel indication of the widespread hunger in the souls of men living in a world full of cynicism, darkness and despair. Our world today is, more than anything else, a world of despair. The despair of the thinking world of our time is one of the most tragic factors of modern experience. There are two ways of looking at this: one is to throw up the hands in horror at all the evidence of this widespread disease - with its accompaniments and expressions in drug-addiction, violence, hippy-ism and permissiveness; the other is to see it as an area of opportunity, and an invitation to evangelise - if we have the courage to face its terrible-ness. For there is a point of contact in all this - not indeed in religiously prepared hearts, for how impatient modern man is of religious categories -but in the very agony of human need and meaninglessness. It is here that the decisive word of hope and purpose must - and can - be spoken.

133) 13:14-41

Paul's sermon preached in Antioch in Pisidia reveals how uniformly consistent was the apostolic preaching in the early Church. Always it is the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. One cannot but admire the masterly fashion in which the New Testament writers reduced the bewildering mass of Old Testament material to a simple, decisive, coherent theme. For them it was but the history of the promise of God, and its realisation in the coming of Christ constituted the good news that God had at last visited His people with salvation. This should serve to convince us of the importance of the Old Testament as such in the life of the believer. It is a measure of our misunderstanding of the gospel that we have paid so little heed to the Scriptures revered and studied by our Lord and His apostles. It is not too much to say that a proper knowledge and understanding of the Old Testament is essential to a true appreciation of the richness and grandeur of the gospel, and that the more we delve into its pages, the greater will be our grasp of the significance and extent of the message of grace. Nor can this neglect be said to have been caused by the influence of destructive biblical criticism only, as it has cast doubt on the authenticity of so much in the Old Testament; many also who hold conservative views of Scripture have tended to concentrate on the New to the neglect of the Old because they have failed to appreciate the essential unity between the two. We must see that the relationship of the Old to the New is not that of law to grace for there is grace in the Old as well as in the New, and law in the New as well as in the Old - but rather that of promise to fulfilment. Once this is understood, the unity that exists between the two becomes obvious, and the need for both in the life of the believer plain.

134) 13:14-41

There always seems to be a ring of triumph and a thrill of joy when the apostles link the promise of the ages with the person of Jesus Christ. Paul seeks to bring home to his hearers a sense of the privilege that has come to them (26), 'to you is the word of salvation sent', you out of all the ages that have longed for the promised Messiah have been singled out to be the witnesses of His coming. Small wonder that the Apostle called it 'glad tidings' in 32. The substance of the good news, and the meaning of the promise, we have revealed in 38, the forgiveness of sins and justification. The word about justification in 39 is full of significance. Paul adds 'from all things from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses', and in so saying points the way to a real understanding of the Old Testament economy. The Jews' misunderstanding lay in the fact that they supposed that justification could come by law, whereas it is clear both from the writings of the New Testament and a proper insight into the Old that the law was never meant by God to be a vehicle of salvation. Its purpose was preparatory and was, as the Apostle reminds us in Gal 3:24, 'our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith'. And it fulfils this function by convincing us of sin - 'by the law is the knowledge of sin' (Rom 3 : 20) - and condemning us before God. One wonders whether Paul felt it especially necessary to utter the word of warning in 40. Did he see then what he was so often to see afterwards, restlessness and resistance on the part of the Jews, and refusal of his message? Be that as it may, it is always proper for such a warning to be given in a gospel message, since it is a very critical - and may be a fatal - thing to react wrongly to the word of grace.

135) 13:14-41

Paul's sermon in the synagogue in Antioch has a tremendous relevance for the Church in our day. He was preaching to men who had been brought up in the tradition of the Scriptures and of Old Testament religion. He was preaching to men with a background, in effect to Church members. This is the significance and relevance of his words for us today - the gospel for Church members, rather than the gospel for outsiders. Now, of course, the gospel is essentially the same for all men, inside or outside, nevertheless there is a presentation of it in relation to religious tradition that is more relevant for those inside than for those outside, because there is more of a point of contact in the tradition and background and upbringing of the people. This is enormously important in Scotland today. For there is a great deal of confusion in, men's minds, men who have been brought up in the Kirk, who love it and labour for it. One has only to read 'Life and Work' to sense this great uncertainty and confusion about the Faith. 'What are we meant to believe, what are we supposed to believe, what is the faith of the Church?' And at the heart of all this, an agonizing uncertainty about the forgiveness of sins. It is a hope, a longing, a search, a goal, but so very often, it has not become an experience. This, of course, is how it once was with Paul himself. He also was brought up in the tradition of the Kirk, steeped in Scriptures - and yet, there was not only confusion and uncertainty, but also uneasiness about not being in the right with God. And when the apostles preached their wonderful gospel of forgiveness, how very disturbed he was! This is how it is with so many in the Church today. And what a longing in the heart of God that they might be brought into the true light of the gospel and the joy of forgiveness!

136) 13:42-52

The last verses of this eventful chapter are full of interest and instruction. It is clear that Paul's preaching made a tremendous impact upon his hearers, so much so that the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God (44). How are we to explain such an amazing response? Two things should be remembered, always bearing in mind that these were days of sovereign divine power, when extraordinary manifestations of the Spirit were widespread. The first is the biblical nature of Paul's preaching, the second is the praying Church behind all his labours. These are the things that create the possibility of blessing, and it will be time enough to consider other approaches to the problem of spiritual renewal when these two have been reestablished in the life of the Church in our day.

It is remarkable to see how reaction and opposition appear side by side with the spirit of awakening. This is something that characterised the whole of Paul's ministry and indeed all the early Church's witness. Nor, in this case, did the opposition come from the hooligan elements of the community, but from the devout and honourable women and the chief men of the city, and we may learn from this not only that the gospel is a divider of men, but that it also reveals what is in men, exposing to view what their real character is, behind the outward shell of morality and religion. It is not what devout and honourable folk do within the confines of conventional religion, but how they react under the challenge of the gospel, that tells us what they really are. And there are many surprising and unexpected revelations!

137) 13:42-52

There is a fateful and final note struck in these verses about the rejection of the gospel message by the Jews. Both in 46,47, and in 50,51 this is made clear. The apostles' turning to the Gentiles (46) does in fact seem to have the aspect of a judicial act about it, and this is certainly confirmed in their action in 51, following their expulsion from Antioch (50). It was the Jews who drove them out, but in that solemn and serious action they were driving themselves out of the kingdom of God. And what Paul and Barnabas did in shaking off the dust of their feet against them simply fulfilled our Lord's express command in Matt 10:14, 15 (cf also Exo 10:28, 29). There comes a point when men say 'No' to God that assumes a finality that proves unalterable, and that 'No' is all they will hear in eternity when they cry to God for mercy.

In contrast to this, however, there is the joy in the hearts of the new disciples of the Lord (52). This stemmed from the knowledge of forgiveness into which they had entered, and from the discovery of meaning in life. The great new thing that had happened to them, the sense of direction given them by the gospel, was big enough to offset any persecution or hardship that becoming a Christian could entail or involve for them. This is the reality of the gospel. C.S. Lewis entitles his autobiographical account of how he became a Christian 'Surprised by Joy'. How true and apt a description! This is how it was in the days of the early Church. It should not be less than this today.

138) 14:1-7

All the characteristics which usually accompanied Paul's ministry appear here, as in the previous chapter - manifestations of divine power, division among his hearers, bitter opposition and persecution. Nor should we wonder that this should be so, for are not these the marks of a living witness? What we should notice particularly is the close association of ideas in 2 and 3. The significant word is 'therefore' (3). The apostles' answer to the opposition was a continuing proclamation of the Word with all boldness.

This means not only that the Spirit's resources made them fearlessly aggressive in their testimony, but that patient continuance in the ministry of the Word is the way to overcome the resistance of men's hearts against the gospel. What a word of encouragement this is for servants of the Lord who are labouring in hard and difficult places against bitter odds. It tells us we should never allow setbacks and difficulties to daunt us, but trust rather in the living and life-giving power of our message to overcome every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God. We may have to labour for a very long time before we win through but God will ultimately add His testimony to the word of His grace. If this passage has any message for us, it is to assure us that we shall reap in due season, if we faint not. Nor must we forget this: we who have so little patience, and often even less discernment, might easily be tempted to give men up when they resist the message of grace, but God yearns after them with infinite compassion and longing, and waits for their response with longsuffering and mercy. What need there is for such a spirit of patient forbearance today!

139) 14:8-10

Interpretation of this miracle of healing as such need not occupy us at this point, or the application of it as an illustration of the spiritual soundness and healing Christ can give in the gospel, as we have already dealt with other similar miracles in this way (see Notes on Acts 3:1-11, 9:32 ff). One point however in particular stands out in contrast to the teaching, for example, of Acts 3: we are told in 9 that the man 'had faith to be healed'. It is clear that this is the crucial point in the miracle. It was through his faith that the man was made whole. But it is important for us to see how he came to have faith to be healed. It is not that he was simply 'one of these fortunate ones who happen to be made that way', one of those better off than others in being in possession of a faith that others did not have. The blessings of God are not for those only who seem to have an aptitude for religion. The truth of the matter is this: the man heard Paul preaching (9), and faith came by hearing. It was born in his heart by the coming of the gospel word to him. This is what Peter refers to in his epistle, 1 Pet 1:18-25, and could be described as 'the virgin birth of faith in the soul'. This is always how faith comes; whether for healing bodies or souls, it is one and the same faith, and it is the gift of God. The preaching of the Apostle became the 'bridge' over which the power of God, the 'faith-bestowing' power of God came to the man's heart, enabling him to lay hold on Christ.

140) 14:8-10

'The hearing of faith' was the theme of yesterday's Note, and this is how the man was healed. But it was a hearing conditioned by the matter and manner of the preaching. Observe the description of that preaching in 1 - 'they...so spake'. There is a whole theology in that little word! We have often had occasion to speak of the content of Paul's theology, and it will do no harm to do so once again. We may recall the famous passage in 1 Cor 2 in which he gives a fair and adequate idea of both the matter and the manner of his preaching. Concerning the message of 'Christ and Him crucified', Dr James Denney says Paul can only mean the living Christ who was once crucified, i.e. the gospel of the death and resurrection of Christ. When Paul speaks of Christ, he is never thinking of Him as He was in the days of His flesh, before the cross, but always as risen and glorified. 'The subject of the apostle's gospel was not Jesus the carpenter of Nazareth, but Christ the Lord of glory; men, as he understood the matter, were saved not by dwelling on the wonderful words and deeds of One who had lived some time ago, and reviving these in their imagination, but by receiving the almighty, quickening Spirit of One Who lived and reigned for evermore.... Just because he had been saved by Christ, and was preaching Christ as a Saviour, the centre of his thoughts and affections was not Galilee, but "the heavenlies". There, the Lord of glory reigned: and from that world He sent His Spirit who changed His people into His image. And so it must always be if Christianity is to be a living religion. Leave out this, and not only is the Pauline gospel lost, but everything is lost that could be called gospel in the New Testament.'

141) 14:9-10

So much for the matter of Paul's preaching. The same passage in 1 Cor 2 describes the manner of his preaching – 'in weakness and fear and in much trembling... not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power'. The unction of the Holy Ghost rested upon a man whose weakness became a channel of grace for the world, whose life became broken bread and poured out wine for the life of man. 'Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body' -this is how he described it to the Corinthians in a later epistle. This also is the content of the 'so spake' in 1, and when the matter referred to in yesterday's Note is preached in this manner, the results are always the same - the demonstration of the Spirit and of power. This is the one infallible law of spiritual harvest for the Church in every age.

142) 14:11-18

What followed the working of the miracle of healing really speaks for itself. There was an electrifying reaction among the people, and they not only feted the apostles, but made to worship them, taking them to be gods come down in the likeness of men. The lesson here is quite simple. It is a decisive contradiction of the view widely held today that if only spectacular enough things happen in gospel work, men will be won to Christ and brought to salvation in large numbers. It also teaches that an undue preoccupation with signs can be very dangerous and misleading. It teaches that the ancillary 'properties' and 'accompaniments' of the gospel, though a part of it and a necessary expression of it, can be dangerous in that they draw men away from real spiritual issues. This is what the healing miracle did in Derbe and Lystra - it sidetracked men from the message Paul preached. And this is what miraculous healing - and other ancillary matters - the social implications of the gospel, C.N.D., Apartheid, and sundry very worthy and legitimate causes - are doing today. We heard recently of a minister who spends much of his time handing out leaflets protesting about this and that and the other. And what is happening in his parish is that people are slipping over into a neighbouring parish where there is an evangelical testimony and being converted. The hungry sheep look up and are not fed in his place because his mind and heart have been taken off eternal issues. Are we alive enough to such issues today?

143) 14:11-18

What Paul said to the people was not really a sermon - that came earlier (7) - but simply a warning exhortation to turn from 'these vanities unto the living God' (15). But it is interesting to note that what he implies here is precisely what he openly states in Romans 1/2, namely that those who observe lying vanities are without excuse. For though it is true that God left nations to themselves in the darkness of their sin, till the gospel came, it is not true that they are therefore not responsible for their heathenism, for He 'left not Himself without witness' (17). Even when He did not reveal Himself as a Saviour God - that came in the fulness of the time - there was a revelation of Him, in nature, through conscience and by the law, as Paul indicates in Romans 1:19ff. Here, he is concerned with the witness of nature and providence. He might well have added, as he does in Rom 2:4, that the goodness of God (17) is designed to lead men to repentance. A message on such a theme is far more likely to lead men to Christ than any number of spectacular miracles. It is God's witness to Himself in nature, providence and grace that touches stony hearts and awakens them to salvation. On the other hand, by contrast, the spectacular may often awaken mere emotional interest and reaction that has no spiritual content. We may recall our Lord's own attitude following the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, when the people wished to make Him their king. As John points out in his gospel (2:25), He knew what was in man, and would not commit Himself to such a superficial, evanescent attitude.

144) 14:19-22

These verses describe something of the travail the apostles experienced in the spreading of the gospel. When we are tempted to take our Christian privileges for granted, we should remember how much it once cost the first pioneers of the faith to carry its message to our shores. There is something near miraculous about Paul's recovery in 20 - some have taken the words to mean that he was in fact resuscitated from death - and it bears out the truth of the saying that a man is immortal until his work is done. This should assure our hearts when natural fears overtake us and are like to rob us of our peace and make our hearts fail within us. We may always count on Divine succour, strength and enabling in all the way that we take.

The burden which led Paul back into the danger area (21) was that of confirming the new converts who had responded to the preaching of the Word. Back he therefore went to the places of shame and reproach, danger and suffering, to establish the work of the gospel in these cities. This is a necessity in any work of evangelism. The need is not only that a decision of faith is come to, but also to maintain it and to continue in the faith in face of every possible discouragement and opposition that might come to assail them. We doubt not that the sight of Paul on his return to them, battle-scarred and marked by his sufferings for the gospel, proved an inspiration to these new disciples, and added weight to his exhortation that they 'must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God' (22). To see someone passing through tribulation triumphantly is the best incentive to bearing it oneself in the same way.

145) 14:23-28

The ordination of elders seems to have been the natural thing for Paul and his companions to do in these new Christian communities, and it is thus likely that a sense of the continuity between the Church and the old economy would prompt them to think in terms of Moses' appointment of elders in old time to judge the people and share the burdens of their leader (Numb 11:14ff). It is interesting to 'read into' this simple statement in 23 all Paul's later teaching in the pastoral epistles about the moral and spiritual qualifications for those appointed as elders and deacons in the churches. We doubt not that, if the spiritual aphorism 'like begets like' has any validity, there would be those of suitable calibre among these new Christians to fulfil in all worthiness the exacting task of shepherding the others in the ways of God.

The return to Antioch and their meeting with the fellowship that has sent them forth must surely have been one of the most memorable of all gatherings in the New Testament era. It does not need much imagination to picture the scene as the Apostle, with the marks of the cross on his battered body and the light of God on his face, rehearsed all that God had wrought through them. What joy and rejoicing there must have been! Oh that this might once again become the Church's experience in our time!

146) 15:1-6

The problem of the admission of the Gentiles into the kingdom of God reaches its climax in this chapter. Beginning in earnest with the conversion of Cornelius and his household, this problem gained momentum during Paul's missionary endeavours in Asia Minor, and it now had to be dealt with and settled decisively and once for all. The controversy hinged on the observance of Jewish law. Circumcision was simply the focal point of the matter, and all else in the law was involved by implication. The words 'except ye....' in 1 mean that in addition to faith in Christ circumcision and the keeping of the law were necessary for salvation.

It is not difficult to see how this emphasis was come to. With large numbers of Gentiles, without any Jewish background, being gathered into the kingdom, it soon became obvious that there would be far more Gentile believers than Jewish and the Christian Jews' answer was: Make the Gentile Christians into Jewish Christians by circumcision. And this eventually became, 'Except ye be circumcised ye cannot be saved'. Paul and Barnabas recognised the danger this attitude was to the gospel itself, and came to Jerusalem for consultation with the apostles. They saw that this was no mere difference of view in which the differing attitudes were simply presenting two complementary aspects of the truth, which could be harmonised. They saw that the whole gospel message was being undermined and threatened, and this they could not tolerate. For them, everything depended on a true and clear settlement of the debate.

147) 15:1-6

Paul was too good a theologian not to challenge this dangerous trend. For him, it was the very heart of the gospel that was being denied, namely, justification by grace through faith alone. For him there were no conditions attached to salvation. Grace is free, unmerited, sovereign, and to imagine that one is safeguarding the gospel by attaching conditions and qualifying clauses to its offer is simply to misunderstand its meaning altogether. Paul realised that to yield here was to betray the only message that was worth calling a gospel, and that for him was unthinkable. The Church has good reason to be thankful to him for the uncompromising stand that he made. If he had not gained his point, the Christian faith would have degenerated into a new Pharisaism, and lost its inner dynamic and, even worse, its message of hope for the world. The question of the Jewish law and circumcision is not a live issue for us today, but the principle lying behind all this certainly is, and the relevance of this chapter will become clear from the next few readings.

148) 15:7-11

Peter's contribution to the discussion is notable and significant. What he says makes it very clear that he and the other Jerusalem apostles were in fundamental agreement with the teaching of Paul and Barnabas on the heart of the gospel (11) - which is what one would expect when men are under the control and guidance of the Holy Spirit. But it is interesting to see the background of this agreement, and how it came about. For this we need to turn to Galatians 2:1-20, where Paul tells us of an earlier confrontation with Peter on this very subject. Peter, as we have seen in Acts, has been brought to a slow emancipation from his narrowness and Jewish exclusiveness - how slow and how grudging is indicated in 10-28. And even after he had seen the light and grasped the message the Holy Spirit was intent on teaching him, he reverted to his earlier prejudiced standpoint (Gal 2: 12) for fear of those who were even more hidebound than he was himself, thereby subscribing to the doctrine that the law was necessary for salvation after all since, from his action, it seemed to be necessary for fellowship. It was this that earned him the resounding rebuke Paul administered to him on that occasion (Gal 2:11, 14 ff). And Peter certainly seems to have benefitted from it; for here, in Jerusalem, he is quite categorical in his stand for the truth alongside Paul and Barnabas, for Peter, as for Paul, Jewish ordinances were explicitly excluded as an element in salvation.

149) 15:12-21

Following Peter's words, Barnabas and Saul, and then James, alike express the wisdom of the Spirit in seeking to stop the dangerous trend. James's words in 19 are significant. He is concerned that the Gentile converts be not troubled by the false emphasis that was being made - as well he might, for there are few things more disruptive of the lives of individuals or fellowships than this legalistic spirit. Some of the harshest things Jesus ever said were directed against the Pharisees for showing such an attitude. 'Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees', he said to His disciples, to safeguard them from the danger of becoming more pre-occupied with the outward than the inward in religious experience. This is a constant danger in every successive age of the Church's life. It is always easier to conform to outward rules and regulations than to embrace the cross as the inward principle of life, especially when the outward observance seems to suggest 'going one step further than others', for this panders to spiritual pride and self-righteousness. The tragedy is that the outward so often becomes a substitute for an inward death that men refuse to die, and Jesus will not own such counterfeit discipleship, however impressive it may look on the surface. As the Psalmist says, it is truth in the inward parts that is needed, and nothing less and nothing other will suffice.

150) 15:22-35

The final outcome of this important discussion seems to some scholars in the nature of a compromise. The terms of the apostles' letter in 29 would seem to indicate that some concessions were made to the Jewish point of view. But we need to recognise a very important principle at work here. The apostles had stated the basic liberating message of the gospel in 9 and 11, but it is true to say that the Christian rarely has as much liberty in practice as he has in theory, because the Christian law of liberty is conditioned by the law of love, and the susceptibilities of the weaker brethren have to be given due consideration and respect. Paul develops this theme in more than one epistle (see Romans 14 and 1 Cor 8/9), and both in teaching and practice demonstrates just how far we should be prepared to go in considering the scruples of others, so long as the essentials of the gospel are safeguarded. None was more generous than he in making concessions, none more adamant and courageous in his opposition to anything that endangered the fundamental truths of the gospel, and this sets an example which all would do well to follow. It may well be that Paul saw very clearly that, with the fundamental principle of the gospel established and safeguarded, the issue was bound in the long run to become a dead one, and that acquiescing in the 'compromise' arrangement could therefore do no further harm. How wise Paul was, and what discernment he showed, in a difficult and delicate situation!

151) 15:22-35

An ancillary lesson of some importance may be drawn from this passage, not related to the question at issue, but of particular value in a realm which presents difficulty to many believers - that of divine guidance. That lesson is given us in the manner in which the Church came to the conclusion it did about the decree to be issued to the churches. The important verses for us are 7, 19, 22, 25, and 28. These verses teach us that the decision they came to, and that they were persuaded the Holy Spirit had brought them to, was reached by a process of sanctified rational thinking. They applied their minds to the situation. It is hardly possible to over-estimate the importance of this, for it highlights in a very graphic way the principle on which the leading of the Spirit should be expected to be given. It is not without significance that there is no mention of prayer for guidance here. This does not mean that they did not pray or were not prayerful - of course they did, and were - but it was essentially a matter of thinking things through in a prayerful spirit, rather than making prayer a substitute for thought. This tells us something important; it means that the divine ideal for making known the will of the Lord in any given situation is the working of the Spirit from within, not from without, persuading the mind as to the feasibility and reasonability of one course of action rather than another. In other words, the Spirit of God working from within not only persuades the mind and carries the rational judgment with him, but also does it in such a way that a man thinks God's thoughts after Him so fully that when he thinks, and comes to the conclusion he does, by rational appraisal of the situation, it is in fact God Himself Who is guiding him. He discerns the will of God, and understands it. As Paul says in 1 Cor 6:17, 'He that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit', and if this be so, then in a man under the control of the Spirit of God there will be an identity of thought between man and God.

152) 15:36-41

These verses mark the beginning of Paul's second missionary journey, which was planned in the first instance as we can see from 36, as a 'follow-up' to the first. The incident relating to Mark, the nephew of Barnabas (and the writer of the second gospel) makes rather sad reading, and but must not blind us to the lessons it teaches us. Mark had already left the two apostles on the first missionary journey (Acts 13:13), and Paul's attitude was obviously that of unwillingness to trust him for the responsible work of the second. Who will presume to say that Paul was wrong in this? It is too easy a solution, we feel, to maintain as some have done that Paul's fiery temperament was impatient of any failures and that he would have been wiser to accept the calmer and more gracious advice of Barnabas as being more Christian. But Paul's first concern was not personal, but whether Mark had stature enough to meet the challenge that the work demanded. If we bear in mind all that Paul was to go through on this journey - there was the widening movement of the divine strategy as the gospel crossed over into Europe, with all the hazards that involved, including prison in Philippi - we may well ask how Mark would have fared in all this. It is all very well to point to Barnabas's attitude of benevolence and forbearance, but we must remember that there is a time for forbearance and a time to be firm for the testimony's sake, and Paul must have thought that Mark would need to prove himself, having once contracted out of the responsibilities laid upon him. This may seem a hard and unbending attitude to adopt, but we think the fact that Paul was commended to the grace of God by the Church (40) was the seal of the Spirit on what he did. God is not slow to vindicate, in unmistakable ways, His servants when they take an unpopular course for His work's sake.

153) 16:1-5

There are three points to note in these verses. The first is that they introduce us to a significant New Testament family, and particularly to one of its members who was destined for honoured service in the kingdom of God. We learn from 2 Tim 1:5 of the faith of Timothy's mother and grandmother, Eunice and Lois, which must certainly have shaped his life and brought him to a knowledge of salvation. We are told here that his father was a Greek, and in all probability not a believer. This may have more significance than is at first apparent. The tensions in a home where one parent is not a believer can be very considerable, and the fact that formative years of Timothy's life were spent in such circumstances may well explain the fears and forebodings to which he seemed to be subject in later years, and which brought Paul's kindly exhortation in his second epistle to him. It is a comparatively common experience in pastoral work to find that tendencies towards depression and despair or low-spiritedness have behind them the history of an unhappy home. In the divine economy parents stand in the place of God to their children, to give them their first understanding of Him, and when through even one parent's lack of care or understanding or love a distorted view of God is given, marks are made and problems created which a lifetime will sometimes not suffice to remove or solve. In this sense it is true that the sins of the parents are visited on their children. Parental delinquency is one of the major causes of spiritual problems in young Christians' lives.

154) 16:1-5

The second point arising from these verses concerns the delivery of the decrees formulated by the apostles at the council in Jerusalem (4). We may note from 15:36 ff that the primary purpose of this second journey was to visit the converts in the various cities, see how they were faring, and encourage them in the faith. And now, here, in 5, we read, 'And so were the Churches established in the faith and increased in number daily'. The implication is surely clear: it was through the delivery of the apostles' decrees with their emphasis on the free grace of God in salvation that led to the establishing of the Church. It is ever so when the gospel is asserted and maintained; men's faith will be strengthened and built up. Free grace is a wonderfully encouraging thing for faith. Faith thrives on it as on nothing else. Wherever the gospel is preached as good news, there will be thriving, vigorous and outgoing witness. It is only when the freedom of the gospel is hedged about with shibboleths and prejudices and regulations that life is crippled and finally strangled.

Paul's action in having Timothy circumcised (3) need not be construed as a departure from the spirit of the decrees. Rather, it was his wisdom in making this concession to the Jews for the sake of keeping the peace, when principle was not at stake. There was no question of trusting in the rites of the law; but he might, if occasion and circumstances demanded it, submit to it. He was made all things to all men, that he might save some, and if this submission to the law, while in no wise compromising the principle of the gospel, would be the means of furthering that gospel, then he would not hesitate to make it (see Note on 15:22-35).

155) 16:1-5

The third point in these verses is Paul's determination that Timothy should accompany him, which is as striking - and characteristic - as his firmness in refusing to allow Mark to do so (15:38). One can only conclude that it was a matter of discernment.

It is a great thing to be able to look at the raw material and know that here is someone that will do something with his life in the service of God. It is not that Timothy was well-reported of by the brethren at Lystra, although that was a factor in the matter; it was that an inner discernment assured Paul that Timothy, young and immature as he then was, would become a worthy servant of the gospel. Those in authority in the Church ought to pray for such a spiritual intuition in their dealings with the young, for to have convictions about someone's future means that one is prepared to toil unremittingly, and often in the face of many set-backs, discouragements and disappointments, for their fullest realisation. Subsequent events were to show that Paul's confidence was not misplaced, for Timothy became a worthy and honoured leader in the early Church.

156) 16:6-10

Paul's primary purpose in going off again to Asia was, as we have seen, to visit the young churches established there and to encourage them in the faith. But God had a deeper intention for the journey. We stand here at the threshold of one of the greatest and most significant movements of the gospel, and one which has most direct relevance and importance for ourselves. For here is the beginning of the movement that brought the gospel to the west, and to our own shores.

Paul's experience at this point was most strange and unusual: he was forbidden to preach in Asia, and suffered not to preach in Bithynia, hedged in on all sides and inexorably led down to the coast, in one of the most disturbing and compelling experiences he had ever known. It was an unusual intervention by God, laying such a restraint upon his spirit that he was left no option but to go to Troas, where the vision of the man from Macedonia came to him with the cry, 'Come over into Macedonia and help us'. There is much for us to learn here, not merely on the main lesson of the divine strategy in the furtherance of the gospel outreach, but also on the subject of how God sometimes makes known His will to His servants. To this latter we shall first of all turn, in tomorrow's Note.

157) 16:6-10

Why were the restraints mentioned here laid upon the Apostle, and in what manner did they come? These are questions that rise in our minds as we read. The Spirit may have spoken to them through some prophet; perhaps circumstances hedging their way proved to be the voice of God; it may have been that they received secret intimations of the Spirit in their spirits, deep inner persuasions within them - these are all ways in which God makes His will known to us. But in whatever way the communications came, the all-important thing for us to remember is that our spirits must needs be sensitive to the voice of the Spirit, and this can only be when we live close enough to the will of God to hear that voice. And when He speaks, it is our wisdom to obey unquestioningly, for events will prove to us how right we were to heed His checks. The vision of the Macedonian made everything immediately clear. They assuredly gathered that the Lord was calling them over to Macedonia. How wise Paul was to refrain from pushing ahead into Asia and Bithynia when he was uneasy in himself, and how much would have been missed if he had not marked time and waited on the Lord. Is this a word to someone today? Is there a warning restraint upon you as you are trying to go in a certain direction? Wait!

158) 16:6-10

There is also a lesson here on the sovereignty of God. Paul was forbidden to preach in Asia, but it was not that Asia was not important to God, or that men's needs there were not so clamant as in Europe. It was that God had other plans for that time, and His strategy demanded the one course rather than the other. In a campaign of war the blueprint of the operation in G.H.Q. is apportioned to the brigades of the army, then to regiments and battalions, then to companies and platoons; and by the time it comes to the smallest group of soldiers there may be no possibility of their knowing the meaning or significance of the part they have to play. But upon their obedience to commands, and the efficient performance of their duties the success of the whole action may depend. It is not necessary for soldiers to know the general's strategy; it is required of them that they shall obey without questioning the orders given them. The idea of a soldier presuming to question the wisdom of the task appointed him is ludicrous. And yet in the Christian warfare is not this what we so often do? God wants men to do His will; He can look after the strategy! The great question in Christian work is, are we prepared to let God have His way? This is the only thing that matters.

159) 16:6-10

But now to the significance of the cry for help. It is very considerable. The Greece of Paul's day was not a primitive place or a primitive civilisation. It was heir to what was probably the greatest and most glorious flowering of the human spirit that has ever been known in the history of man. It was the home of culture, and culture that was the highest and best. Periclean Athens was a byword on the pages of history. There was a brilliance about its cultural life, and the eminence of its philosophers that, has never been exceeded. Athens represented the highest and best in learning, philosophy, knowledge; it was the home of all that was great in culture, the highest the human spirit has ever attained. And yet – here is a man asking for help - not merely, be it noted, for himself alone. He spoke for all Greece - 'help us'. It was a confession of the need of this great and glorious tradition and heritage for the word of the gospel, a confession that the world by wisdom knew not God. Which thing is a parable; for it tells us that the very highest to which the mind of man can rise cannot satisfy the human spirit. There is a 'God-shaped blank' in the human heart that no human culture can ever fill, only God. The truth is the ancient world was a lost and bankrupt world, bankrupt intellectually, morally and spiritually. In Acts 17 we are told that the Athenians spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing. This is intellectual bankruptcy. The moral plight is seen in the utter degradation of human life, so well known and evidenced in the classics. As the poet says,

'Deep weariness, and sated lust
Made human life a hell'.

The spiritual bankruptcy is seen in the fact that men, in their desperation, having found no help in philosophy, turned to mystery religions, groping for light that could not be found there. Such was the Macedonia to which the gospel was now to come.

160) 16:6-10

These verses, and the comments in yesterday's Note, prompt some comments in relation to the potential and problems of living in a cultural milieu. Always, where men think, does the dilemma of the human spirit obtrude itself most agonisingly. Consider our own situation today in the western world. Never has there been so much culture! We are an affluent society, that can afford to indulge its taste and bent for culture. And it has. Look at the paper-back industry, for example, that has put significant and serious literature into the hands of millions in our time. And what is the result? A society that is desperately sick, and in urgent need. Every aspect of it cries out, 'Come over and help us'. Look at the problem of drug-addiction. Look at the meaninglessness of life everywhere evident, in young and old alike, the nihilism of thought, the despair, the pessimism, the cynicism - all alike are calling out desperately, 'Come over into Macedonia and help us' -into the cultural vacuum, into the cultural emptiness and despair. Long ago, the Greek philosophers said, 'The best thing of all is not to be born, and the next best thing is to die'. And now today, our philosophers publish books such as 'In Defence of Suicide'. The wheel has come full circle and the Macedonian call assumes a terrible and urgent relevance for our time. And the word with which Paul answered that cry - 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved' is still the word for today. Christ saves now as He saved then. The world by wisdom cannot get through to God; but it is possible to be redeemed unto God. This is what the gospel offers, this the help it gives, to those who believe in Christ.

161) 16:11-15

It seems that when Paul and his companions arrived at Philippi they were at a loss what to do, for they abode there certain days. One can almost sense the perplexity, and even the anti-climax, after the dramatic vision of the man from Macedonia. But God was at work, for all that, in His most characteristic way, in quietness and unobtrusiveness. The door into Europe for the gospel was the unspectacular conversion of Lydia, whose heart was opened by the ministry of the Word. This opened heart led to an opened home and, ultimately, to an opened continent! A small beginning, it might be said, but what repercussions it had! . We must not forget that the 'door' by which God's mercy and grace entered the world was a humble peasant maid called Mary and a helpless Babe. God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the mighty! We see from the nature of Lydia's experience that God does not confine Himself to one set pattern of conversion, but shows a wonderful originality in dealing with us. Nothing could have been more dramatic than Paul's conversion, and nothing more gentle than Lydia's, as her heart opened like a flower to the sun under the preaching of the Word. We should respect this freedom that God reserves to Himself in the work of regeneration, and not demand that every conversion should be necessarily like our own. What is important is not how, but whether, a man is converted.

162) 16:11-15

There are a number of points to note about the conversion of Lydia. First of all, we learn that she was a worshipper of God, yet she was not in the light of the gospel. From which we may learn that to have a religious tradition is not always the same thing as having a personal experience of the grace and salvation of God. Furthermore, we are told that she 'heard Paul'. The verb in the text is in the imperfect tense, denoting that she came back more than once to hear him. Clearly she had been gripped and arrested by the Word of God - this is always the way God works, for His word is a living word and when it drops in people's hearts, things begin to happen. The imperfect tense may also suggest that her conversion was a gradual one rather than sudden, as was the Philippian jailor's. This is further suggested by the word that is used to describe what happened to her. The word 'opened' could be rendered, according to one commentator, 'unravelling' - like unravelling a tangled skein of wool. Lydia was a worshipper, a seeker, but all confused and mixed up and needing to be straightened out. But this kind of straightening out cannot ordinarily be done all at once, but takes time under the patient ministry of the Word and Spirit of God. 'The entrance of Thy words giveth light', says the Psalmist, but it is often a gradual illumination. Finally, we are told that she 'attended' to the things Paul spoke. The word means 'to give oneself to'. Her heart went out to what she heard, gloriously, unreservedly, it was something she had been looking for all her life. This is the authentic response evoked by the gospel in the hearts of those that are called. Is this our response?

163) 16:16-24

It is significant that there should have appeared at this juncture the girl with the evil spirit. Her presence signalled the reaction of the powers of darkness against the coming of the gospel of light to Europe. It is not to be wondered at that Satan should resent the presence of the apostles in his hitherto undisputed territory. He does not take kindly to the spoiling of his house. This is the basic truth that lies behind both the incident and the opposition of her masters which followed. Indeed, the whole devilish stirring up of trouble that eventually landed Paul in prison was his attempt to destroy this new thing once for all. Those who challenge the kingdom of darkness may expect bleeding backs. But that is not the deepest word, and there is something even more important for us to learn. No one can read the gospels without being struck by the fact that Christ's presence seemed to draw forth the demons into the open, and what we must realise is that they were drawn forth in spite of themselves, to be exposed and defeated and set at naught. This is how it was here also; the power of God was on the initiative, and evil could not remain hid. But more: the gospel was calling the tune all the way through. True, Satan was trying to harm and destroy the work, but in the very doing so, he unwittingly played into the hands of God, for the way He chose to reach the jailor was by putting His servants into prison to meet him. This glorious sovereignty is not always realised in our experience as much as it might. Rightly understood, it affords enormous encouragement to us, and may be just the word of grace for some storm-tossed soul today. Are you under pressure from the evil one? Then expect God to turn the tables on him, and believe for a resounding victory. That is exactly why God has permitted him to distress you. Not for nothing does the Scripture say, 'Greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world'!

164) 16:25-34

Paul and Silas were put in prison as a result of the deliverance of the demon-possessed girl, but you cannot fetter the gospel by locking up its heralds. As Paul himself was to put it much later, 'The word of God is not bound'. And so God turned this apparently conclusive disaster into a great triumph of grace, for the imprisonment was made the means of the jailor's conversion. It was as if God had said to the Apostle, 'Paul, there is a man here on whom I have set My love. I want to reach him, and the only way I can do it is from the inside. Are you prepared to go inside, with all that that entails in suffering and distress, for My sake?' And Paul, bondsman of Jesus Christ, rejoiced to be counted worthy to share the travail of the Saviour for that lost soul. Well might he write to the Philippian Church, 'The things that happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel'! This is the law of spiritual harvest in the kingdom of God. What a way to live - bleeding backs, feet in stocks, but a word of power on the lips, and souls born into newness of life! Oh to be counted worthy to share in it!

165) 16:25-34

In the story of the jailor's conversion, admittedly one of the most dramatic in the New Testament, one compelling lesson we are meant to learn is that the fact of eternity suddenly broke into the man's life. The real situation suddenly became plain to the man, and a world he had ignored and had had no conception of 'took over' and was seen to be the only important one. Perhaps the supreme value of the story for us is that it draws aside the veil and allows us to see life as it really is, shorn of all its illusions, barriers and distractions, and stripped down to basic fundamentals. Eternity is not a state of existence beyond this earthly life, some far-off shadowy thing too remote from the present to worry about, but something right there at our side, touching us at every point, were we but conscious of the fact. All that separates us from eternity is a thin partition of time and sense, so thin that one might swear sometimes that one could hear whispers from the other side. And in this instance the whispers become a voice of thunder that unnerved and all but unhinged the hitherto careless and callous jailor. So swiftly and unexpectedly can God reduce a man from indifference to terror. The wonder is that such a terrible God should prove so incredibly gentle and tender and full of grace!

166) 16:25-34

The extraordinary happenings of that night proved too much for the jailor. The natural earthquake that swung open the doors of the prison, coupled with the psychological earthquake caused by the phenomenon of two bleeding-backed prisoners singing praises to God at midnight, impervious to any hurt or indignity he could inflict upon them, unnerved him, for it was clear to him that the strange doctrines preached by these men had come to life, and a real living God had suddenly broken in upon him, and face Him he must. Small wonder that he cried out in terror, 'What must I do to be saved?' It is this experience that proves so shattering in a genuine conversion. For so long God is thought of - if He is thought of at all - as a comfortably distant, almost impersonal Presence, remote from daily life, so much so that it is regarded almost as a breach of etiquette to speak of knowing Him personally, and an evidence of religious eccentricity that causes general embarrassment. But when the real God, the mighty God of the Scriptures invades our lives, all our pre-conceived notions crumble in a moment and we are broken and trembling before Him. He comes so agonisingly near, and there is no escape from His inexorable Presence and all-consuming love. And in the mystery of that tremendous encounter - wonder of wonders! - we find pardon and peace and joy, as did the Philippian jailor. Never was there such joy in that gloomy prison-house!

167) 16:25-34

The experience through which the jailor passed in his bewilderment and terror afford a useful illustration of what happens, and what needs to happen, in true conversion. First of all, he awakened out of his sleep. This he did literally, of course, but this was true also in a metaphorical, spiritual sense. The deep sleep brought upon his soul by sin and Satan was ended. This is always the first step in salvation; the Spirit of God awakens the slumbering soul to recognise its position and see the necessity of salvation. Then, he called for a light, and this literal reaction is parabolic of the instinctive cry of an awakened, convicted soul. The one thing intolerable for one so awakened is to remain in darkness in his awakened state. He must have light at all costs, and he feels that life itself would be a small price to pay for the light he feels he so sorely needs to give him peace with God. This is the meaning of his heart-cry, 'What must I do to be saved?' It is as if he had cried, 'Lighten my darkness, I beseech Thee'. And so Paul shone the lamp of the gospel into his darkness and cried, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved'. And the man believed, and was saved.

What does this mean? It means (a) that he cast his burden on the Lord, casting himself on the mercy of Christ, thus finding peace with God, and (b) that he received Christ, for to believe is to receive (John 1:12). The faith that ventures wholly on Christ is the faith that opens the door of the heart to let Him in. Thus he was saved, in a twofold salvation - saved from the terror of the Lord he had ignored and left out of his life, whose laws he had broken, and saved from the ultimate despair of the life he knew. So it must be with every soul. God, by His Spirit, cries, 'Awake, thou that sleepest, and rise from among the dead, and Christ shall give thee light' (Eph 5:14).

168) 16:35-40

These verses make it plain that there is a time for asserting one's rights as a Christian, as well as a time for meek endurance of, and submission to, wrong-doing. The distinction is between meekness and weakness - the two are not the same and should not be confused. Paul and Silas meekly submitted to the indignity and suffering of their imprisonment, but they were not prepared weakly to allow wrongdoers to trample over them without protest. When thus to speak and when to be silent may well always be a matter of spiritual discernment, but it is a discernment that the Christian needs to develop, for without it he is liable both to grieve the Spirit by voluble protest when he should rather submit, and to bring reproach on the testimony of the gospel by silence when he should undoubtedly speak. In this instance Paul asserted his rights as a Roman citizen, and from this we may gather that it is no part of a Christian's duty to dispense with the protection and indeed privilege that properly constituted law and authority give to the individual. We do not, by becoming Christians, opt out of this world, either as to its privileges or its responsibilities. The effectiveness of Paul's attitude is seen in the reaction of the magistrates. They were thoroughly alarmed at the possible implications of their actions and begged the apostles to depart. They were much too uncomfortably vital people to have in the community. Does not this indicate that Paul's attitude was the right one in the circumstances?

169) 16:35-40

One final lesson in these verses must be noted before we pass on to the next chapter. We are told that the magistrates came and besought Paul and Silas to depart from their city. Their attitude stands in marked and glaring contrast to the joyful reception of the gospel shown by the jailor and his house, and reminds us afresh that the gospel, to use Paul's words elsewhere, is a savour of life unto life to some and of death unto death to others. Paul had said to the jailor, 'Do thyself no harm', and it would have been well for the magistrates to have taken heed of these words as well as the jailor. The significance of their attitude must be seen against the background of the coming of the gospel to Europe. This was a time of destiny for a whole new continent - a bridgehead of grace had been established in the darkness and despair of that time, and these men, having considered the implications of what had been happening, deliberately declared themselves against the whole business. It is, of course, inevitable that in any 'enemy-occupied' territory, the oppressed can become used to the oppression; and they therefore have to make up their minds whether they are glad or sorry the invasion has come. For one thing is certain: the status quo will be disturbed. And men are thus forced to a decision, to make up their minds which side they are on. Neutral they cannot be. This they realised only too clearly, and they chose accordingly. The gospel was an embarrassment to them, it represented to them an incommensurable economic risk, a threat to their hope of continued gains, and this finally weighed the balance for them against Christ. It was Him, not only Paul and Silas, that they bid depart from their coasts.

And it is this dire attitude which, when persisted in, finally earns for men the dread 'Depart from Me' from the lips of Christ at the Judgment Seat.

170) 17:1-4

These verses are important for the light they shed on Paul's method of evangelism. What he is described as doing here was his general practice wherever he went, and we may take from this that it is set down as an example to follow. There is therefore much to be learned here, and we should be careful not to miss any of it. In the first place, Paul's approach was objective rather than subjective. It was not his (subjective) experience of Christ that he preached, nor was he concerned to tell his hearers what Christ had done for him (although he might well have done so; he had much to tell!) but what was written in the Scriptures. 'He reasoned with them out of the Scriptures', unfolding to them the basic facts of God's redemption. It is this that gives authority to preaching; the great affirmations of the faith have a dignity and a majesty - and a power - all of their own. In the second place, we note that he reasoned with them. His concern was not with their emotions, but with their minds. This is important. It is sometimes mistakenly supposed that the evangelical emphasis is emotional in its essence and therefore suspect, but this is to misunderstand the biblical position. It is the appeal of truth to the mind that is the spearhead of New Testament evangelism, and through that appeal the kindling of the heart and the conquering of the will. Such is the pattern unfolded in the apostolic preaching. In this sense also the gospel has a reasonable case. It not only invites men to think, it makes them think - furiously!

171) 17:1-4

The words 'opening' and 'alleging' in 3 are full of interest. The first is also used in 16:14 to describe Lydia's conversion, and has, as we have seen, the force of making plain and unravelling things that have hitherto been complicated and mysterious. This is the great asset in presenting a reasoned and reasonable case for the gospel. To 'allege' literally translated means 'to set before' and is the word used of spreading a meal before someone. Paul spread the facts before his hearers and certainly gave them food for thought!

His teaching was in two parts - (a) a searching of the Scriptures to ascertain what they say about the Messiah, and (b) an assertion that these statements about the Messiah are fulfilled in Jesus. As (a), it is deeply interesting that this needed to be done. The fact is that there are two strands of teaching about the Messiah in the Old Testament, one stressing His glory and kingship, the other striking a minor note in the idea of a suffering servant. The Jews never seem to have understood this second strand; their whole pre-occupation was with the first, and consequently the other was obscured. We see how complete this misunderstanding was in the fact that when Jesus taught His disciples that the Son of man must suffer, they could not comprehend him. Our Lord's teaching seems in fact to underline Paul's here. First he sought to convince the disciples that He was the Messiah, then - after Caesarea Philippi - He taught them that He must suffer. Paul began with the latter, and sought to establish the validity of the idea of a suffering Messiah, and having done so from the Scriptures, asserted that in the sufferings of Jesus on the Cross this Old Testament teaching was fulfilled, that in fact He fitted the picture of a suffering Messiah so completely that it could not be doubted that He was the Messiah! The logic of his case was clearly unanswerable. His hearers must either believe or resist in unreasoning rebellion.

172) 17:4

The result of this patient and reasoned exposition was that some Jews and a multitude of Greeks believed. We need only look at the first chapter of 1 Thessalonians to see the quality of the work that it accomplished in their hearts and to understand something of the implications of 'believing' the gospel. It meant, first of all, 'turning to God from idols' (1 Thess 1:9), that is to say, they made a clean break with their past, were delivered from the sentence of condemnation under which they stood as sinners - how else should they escape from the prison house if their sentence had not been cancelled? - and brought into fellowship with God through the great reconciliation wrought in the blood of the cross. Then, next, it meant service for God, issuing from that newfound fellowship. And the measure of their endeavour is seen in the fact that from them sounded out as a trumpet the word of the Lord (1 Thess 1:8). They were impelled by a Christ-given passion to tell out the gospel that had saved them. Thirdly, it meant that they now waited for God's Son from heaven to come and establish His glorious kingdom. For them, therefore, the gospel was a word to their past, to the present, and to the future. A few converts of such calibre are worth their weight in gold! The multitude of Greeks had obviously been prepared for this by the secret operation of the Spirit of God, and we can see now the extent of the meaning of the cry, 'Come over into Macedonia and help us'. Greece was hungering and thirsting for the Word of life. And what a feast was spread before a waiting people!

173) 17:5-9

As always, however, reaction was inevitable, and what follows shows how positively evil the unbelief of men can be, bringing out the worst in them. Reaction against the word of the gospel can bring out some very ugly traits in human nature. The protest the Jews made is full of instruction. The word rendered 'turned the world upside down' is a development of the word 'resurrection'. The fact is, the apostles' preaching was causing a widespread moral and spiritual resurrection, and the Jews saw this only too clearly. It was too living a gospel that they were proclaiming, and too uncomfortable by far. Like the magistrates at Philippi, the Jews of Thessalonica were not prepared to have their world turned upside down by the gospel of Christ, and they reacted in much the same way, determined at all costs to drive out the offending message and those who proclaimed it. It is significant to note how they interpreted Paul's message. He was asserting, they said, that Jesus was a king. We should be grateful to the Jews for preserving so plainly in their complaint against him the nature of his preaching. The gospel he proclaimed made absolute demands upon men. We should never forget this. It is simply a misunderstanding of the gospel to think that it should ever be otherwise. The Christ Who saves us lays claim to us totally and unconditionally. He Who died that we might be forgiven now lives to reign over us as a King. Bowing the knee to Him in surrender is not an advanced stage of discipleship to which one comes at some stage after one's conversion; it is the initial step by which we enter into the kingdom of God. If Jesus Christ is not Lord of all, He is not Lord at all.

174) 17:10-15

The reaction of the Bereans is one that would bring joy to any preacher of the Word. It was the ideal response. They did not merely listen to Paul; they received the Word with readiness of mind. There was no hard and bitter prejudice about them as there was with so many of the Jews, but on the contrary they were prepared to be instructed and led into the truth. We have before remarked on the danger of having a closed mind to the truth of God and of mistaking prejudice for conviction. The end-result of such an attitude is the development of the ugly and sinister bigotry which crucified Jesus and has caused untold harm and hurt in every age. How different were the Bereans! Not that they were credulous or unthinking in the matter; indeed they brought critical and keenly appraising minds to what Paul said, and turned to the Scriptures to verify his statements. It is said of these Bereans that they were 'more noble than those in Thessalonica'. The word 'noble' literally means 'well-born', and is used of the aristocracy. But here it refers rather to the generous, open-hearted attitude that characterises noble men - an attitude free from prejudice and prepared to give something a fair hearing. This in itself is a work of grace in the soul, the production of a true aristocracy of the spirit. But the absence of it, and the consequent resistance and rejection of the gospel to which this leads, means that men are without excuse when they do so.

175) 17:1-15

When the Bereans found that Paul's teaching was in accord with the Word of God, they believed the gospel. The point of this should not be missed. It is this: that an unprejudiced reading of the Scriptures ought to bring men to a saving faith in Jesus Christ, that when the gospel is given a fair hearing by reasonable men, it gains the assent of their minds and hearts, and that it is prejudice and unreasonable opposition that make men reject the gospel, not its reasonable appeal. This has a real significance for our present situation in Scotland today. That there has been for generations a widespread misunderstanding of the gospel among our people is only too apparent. But now that it's true message is again being proclaimed the great need is that church members should turn to the Scriptures and examine what is being said in the light of them, as the Bereans did. And if the message of repentance and faith, new birth and conversion, is found to be in fact the message of Christ and His apostles, then the one right thing to do is to submit to it in humble obedience and surrender. Surely this is reasonable and logical?

176) 17:16-21

The fuller significance of the Macedonian call becomes more and more apparent as time goes on. Paul now comes to Athens, the heart and home of the glory that was Greece. All that was brilliant in the world of wisdom, learning and culture was to be found there, but at its heart there stood the altar with the inscription 'To the unknown God', an eloquent and tragic symbol of its failure to find the true meaning of life, and a testimony to the truth of Paul's assertion that 'the world by wisdom knew not God'. The apostle's reaction was characteristic. The word used to describe his emotion (16) is a strong one and gives our word 'paroxysm'. An unbearable yearning gripped him as he saw this great city full of images but without a soul, and he was driven to preach. He received a casual and indifferent reception, however. The Greeks, for all their philosophy, had failed to find the answer and in their failure had become cynical. 'Some new thing' (21) was now the limit of their enquiry. Disillusioned in their search for truth they took refuge in mere cleverness. This is the breeding ground for despair, and may explain both the amount of cynical cleverness in our universities and halls of learning today and the high incidence of despondency and even suicide among intellectuals. For this there is but one answer - the gospel - and Paul proceeded to proclaim it. Seldom has there been a more distinguished audience; seldom could they have had a greater opportunity to know the truth!

177) 17:16-21

Paul's visit to Athens is one which we would naturally expect to be of great importance and significance, and indeed the record of that visit is one of the most prominent and outstanding passages in this great book of early Church history. But it can hardly be denied that very different estimates have been made of the worth of Paul's visit and witness there, and not a few strictures have been passed on him. For one thing, it has sometimes been objected that Paul must have been a cultural 'Philistine', for he took precisely no notice of all the glorious Greek culture that must have been all around him. The Frenchman Renan says that the ugly little Jew abused Greek art by describing the statues as idols. It was a magnificent city, without a doubt, and still is. But Paul ignored its art, ignored its philosophy. All we are told is the fact that his spirit was stirred within him when he saw the whole city given over to idolatry. But we do not consider Paul to have been a cultural 'Philistine': a man with his breadth of mind could not have been. But then, he was not in Athens as a tourist, but as an ambassador for Christ. And there are some things more important than culture for a man who has the souls of men on his heart. Paul saw something in Athens which made him forget his interest in cultural beauty - he saw a city that had lost its soul, he saw the ultimate agony of idolatry, and this eclipsed for him any other consideration. For he had a passion for souls, and knew he had a message that could meet the need of Athens. If all this has any message for us today, it is that it prompts the question whether we Christians are prepared to let even this -the consciousness of the agony of men and of the fact that we have a message that can meet it - come between us and our cultural interests and pursuits. It is possible, even for Christians, to have too many cultural irons in the fire to be ever of very much use to God.

178) 17:22-34

Another criticism made of Paul is that he accommodated himself too much to the culture and philosophic interests of his audience at Athens, as witness for example his quotation from the Greek poets (28), with the result that he failed to make his usual impact, and that this made him determined in the future to preach nothing save Christ and Him crucified (1 Cor 2:2). But this, we submit, is a highly questionable assumption. We are asked to believe that Paul, moved to his depths by the need he saw in Athens, and knowing that his gospel was the power of God unto salvation, nevertheless succumbed to the temptation to 'get with it' among these Athenian philosophers, that he got so carried away with the company he was in that he fumbled and failed in what might have been a supreme opportunity to communicate the gospel. This is asking too much of us. For it is to presuppose him to be a man of straw, a man so easily moved from his convictions that he could bungle such an opportunity of presenting Christ. One recalls what is said of his 'manner' of preaching in 17:2 ff - it was ever Christ-centred and scriptural. He had proved his message in every situation; why should he have changed it now? To pass such estimate on the Apostle is both to misinterpret the text here and also the statement in 1 Cor 2:2 - it is clear, after all, that the word of the cross that he preached at Corinth was the message he habitually preached elsewhere, and not something to which he had returned after he had allegedly abandoned it at Athens. 'With it' theology is undoubtedly more a characteristic of the twentieth century than of the first. And there is a saying, is there not, that when we criticise, it is our own faults that we seem to see in others?

179) 17:22-34

No; Paul did not change his message, nor is it true that his preaching failed to make an impact in Athens. Certain men clave to him (34), and others were moved enough to make them decide to hear him again. And we think that that was no mean impression to have made in a place like Athens! But not only so. A careful study of his message reveals that it stresses the basic ideas of the gospel. Look what 18 says that he preached: Jesus and the Resurrection! There is the whole gospel in that testimony; and if we bear in mind that most, if not all, of the recorded sermons in Acts are in more or less summary form, it becomes clear that in fact Paul's teaching here was the same in essence as it was in other places. What he says, for example, emphasises the fact that the Christian faith is a revealed religion. The knowledge of God's love and salvation is not something that can be arrived at by the wisdom of men. It is revealed in Christ and declared (23) by His apostles, and there is no other way of knowing it. It should be obvious how necessary such an assertion was for the philosophers of Athens, proud as they were of their wisdom. Then in 27 he touches one of the fundamental truths of the gospel, as he speaks in one breath of man's sense of separation from God and of God's nearness to men. This is the mystery of sin - it erects a barrier between us and God; as sinners we are like the prodigal in the far country. Yet, paradoxically, He is not far from us, but near in the word of the gospel. The Church would be well served today if all her ministers said as much in their preaching!

180) 17:22-34

The climax of Paul's message, and its focal point, is the summons to repentance in 30. The reason why men do not know God and cannot find Him is that they have sinned. Sin blinds men's hearts. It is not an intellectual, but a moral, problem that keeps them from God. They resist His will and refuse to submit to His holy laws. Their need therefore is to repent and turn to Him. A moment's reflection will make it clear that this has ever been the fundamental message proclaimed by those sent from God to men. For the prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles in the New, and indeed for our Lord Himself, the spearhead of their proclamation was the command to repent. We therefore do Paul an injustice if we too readily assume that he adopted a different approach to suit the philosophers of Athens. This is in fact substantiated by the reaction they showed in 32. It seems they were prepared to listen to him up to the point at which he spoke of resurrection and judgment to come, but when these fundamental truths confronted them they did what men do today in face of true gospel preaching. The mocking spirit usually hides a rebellious and resistant heart, and nothing uncovers and unveils this so utterly as the message of the gospel. If Paul's preaching had the effect that true gospel testimony always has, may we not safely assume that he preached in Athens the same basic message as he always did?

181) 17:22-34

One further comment must be made before leaving this passage. We may well ask why there should be an altar anywhere with the inscription 'To the unknown God', or why the world should fail to know God by wisdom. The answer must be that sin has separated man from God and thus clouded his mind. The implications of this, however, are considerable. It means, for example, that man's ignorance of God and of the things of God, as well as his inability to get through to God, is a culpable ignorance. And it is this that explains the juxtaposition of 'ignorance' and the summons to 'repent' in 30. The nature of sin makes it clear that man is not simply an unfortunate victim of circumstances, but a rebel against the will and law of God. This is why the ultimate challenge of the gospel is a summons to repent. The issues involved are not intellectual, but moral. This Paul makes very clear in the famous passage in Rom 1:18 ff, where he speaks of men 'holding the truth in unrighteousness' (18) and not liking 'to retain God in their knowledge' (28). This is the truth of the matter, true of the Athenians and true of all men. As the Garden of Eden story makes plain, the essence of this sin is the desire for independence from God. The divine prohibition about the tree of knowledge of good and evil was meant as a reminder of man's creatureliness, and this he refused, thus revolting against his God-given destiny. First, he would not see God's purpose for him, then he could not. This is his tragedy - and his responsibility. Hence the need to repent.

182) 18:1-3

We now follow Paul from Athens to Corinth. In many ways these two cities presented a complete contrast but they had one thing in common - their need of the gospel. Athens was full of idolatry, Corinth was full of sensuality, and has been called 'the Vanity Fair of the ancient world', a city with a reputation for its immorality, combining in itself much that was of the most unsavory and sleazy in life. Athens was the cultural Capital, Corinth was the commercial capital of Greece, a meeting place of the nations, a city of great luxury and notorious vice. 'To play the Corinthian' was a phrase which had been coined to describe their debauched way of living that had become notorious throughout the ancient world. To such a place Paul now came, at this point well through his second missionary journey, during which he had endured hazards and burdens recorded and unrecorded that must have left their mark upon even this indomitable spirit. Anyone who has known the strain of the Lord's work towards the end of a strenuous tour of missionary duty will know very well that things could not have been easy for him, and that pressure on faith at such a time can be very real. To the most valiant and faithful of the servants of God there comes at times the dark night of the soul, when everything seems black and forbidding, and the journey too great. Even Elijah has his juniper tree, and Jeremiah his sore travails and agonies. Thus it seems to have been with Paul at this time, as subsequent verses will prove. He had known the loneliness of things in Athens (17:16) after the oppositions of the Jews, and we may gather from 2 Thess 3:2, written about this time, that he was beset by unreasonable and wicked men. He was clearly in a state of anxiety and stress, and the burden of the work was telling on him. Such is the background of the events recorded in this chapter.

183) 18:1-3

These brief verses contain a wonderful lesson on the joys and compensations that constantly surprise us in the Christian life. Paul's meeting with Aquila and Priscilla bears the authentic stamp of true Christian destiny. The edict of Claudius the emperor was from the human standpoint a disaster, but God made use of it and turned the wrath of man to praise Him. Out of the disciples' hurried flight from Rome He brought forth a priceless and fruitful friendship which was a source of mutual inspiration and encouragement over the years to these warriors of the faith. This is indeed one of the ineffable compensations of Christian service; it may be costly to live in such utter dedication of spirit as Paul did, but it begets many precious things, not least intimate friendships that are ordained of God to bless and enrich His servants' experience. God is no man's debtor, and He has promised the hundredfold to those who present themselves a living sacrifice for His sake and the gospel's. Not only so, the quality of such friendships, in resilience and sheer vitality and sparkle, bears witness to the emancipation of personality and comes through a total surrender of heart and will to God. We 'come into our own' in the fullest sense when we give ourselves over to Him, and all our powers attain their maximum expression. We are never so free, or so human, or capable of such warm and intimate friendships, as when we are captive to the will and love of God.

184) 18:4:11

The new friendship was the Lord's first provision for His faithful servant; the second was the vision and the attendant word of assurance that came to Paul in the midst of the dark night of the soul. That it should have required a manifestation of this unusual nature to assure Paul of the divine protection and help is some indication of the extent of the strain and stress that were upon him at this time. Perhaps the appalling conditions of vice and sin prevailing in that lost city were tending to bring a feeling of near despair to his usually dauntless spirit, filling him with fear and foreboding. Perhaps the continuing opposition and persecution that attended his ministry had begun to bring a great weariness on his soul, and the costliness of such a life was now telling on him. At all events, the divine word came at the point of need, and what a word it was! Paul's heart must have rejoiced, as he was renewed and reinforced in his work by the knowledge that, in spite of all the towering circumstances around him, God had much people in that city, people as yet in darkness but destined to be called into the light of the gospel by his faithful ministry. The result was that he continued there for a further eighteen months teaching the word of God. Perseverance and patience are indispensable necessities for God's work. Not without travail will it be worthily accomplished, but the harvest is sure. 'He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him' (Ps 126:6).

185) 18:4-11

The general implications of Paul's vision are considerable for all who engage in the service of the Lord. To have a sense of call in the gospel and to have been sent by God to any situation, however hard and unpromising, surely means to fall heir to the promise given first to Paul on this occasion. Who could but go on, in face of such an assurance! Are we weary in the work, weary of the battle of prayer, weary of wrestling, of the testimony? Go on, God says, a harvest is arranged and ordained, hold not thy peace. I will work, and who shall let it? One is reminded of the early Church's prayer in Acts 4, 'Grant unto thy servants that with all boldness they may speak Thy word, stretching forth thine hand.... that signs and wonders may be done in the name of Thy holy child Jesus'. This was what the vision did for Paul, for on the strength of it he continued for a year and a half in that terrible place preaching the gospel. 1 Cor 6:9-11 will give us some indication of the impact that that preaching made on these lost, broken, debauched and degraded lives in the cesspool that was Corinth. Once again the power of the gospel to redeem, to transform, to sanctify, to cleanse and renew, was demonstrated and vindicated. If this incident has anything to say to hard-pressed, discouraged preachers of the gospel, it is this: 'Let us not be weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not' (Gal 6:9).

186) 18:12-17

The new attack on Paul by the Jews in these verses is not the same old story of opposition that we have seen repeatedly throughout Acts, but something much more serious. It was not merely a case of stirring up the crowd or appealing to the city magistrates, but an appeal to the Roman governor. City magistrates had authority only within the city, but the governor had authority throughout the whole province, and an adverse verdict here would affect Paul's freedom in that whole area, and would be as likely to influence neighbouring governors by precedent. It was therefore a very critical situation, and a strategic moment for the gospel and its furtherance. But God was with Paul, as He had indicated by the vision, and moved Gallio to resist the Jews' pressure and see through their intrigue. The governor did in fact what Pilate failed to do for Christ - he stood up against the mob. The outcome of this divine over-ruling illustrates well the Psalmist's word that 'He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision' (Ps 2:4). The Greeks took advantage of Gallio's snub to the Jews, and gave vent to their anti-Jewish feeling, seizing Sosthenes, the ruler of the Jews, and giving him a sound beating. The Jews got more than they bargained for that day, and Gallio turned a blind eye to the indignities they suffered. The tables were turned completely upon them. This is always liable to happen when men go too far in their resistance against the gospel. When God chooses to assert His sovereignty, there are no half-measures with Him!

187) 18:12-17

Another word is necessary in comment on Gallio's attitude to the incident here recorded. The AV rendering makes it seem that the governor was being branded for indifference to spiritual matters. But this is hardly what the historian of Acts is really saying about him. The earlier verses suggest that he was actually sympathetic towards the gospel and to Paul rather than otherwise, for he refused to be moved or influenced by the Jews' intrigues. Yet it may not be possible to exonerate him completely. If 'these things' (17) refer, not so much to the drubbing that Sosthenes got for his pains as to 'the easily aroused quarrels between Greeks and Jews, and the Jews' complaints about matters affecting their own laws' (F.F. Bruce), then it may well be that the reason for his turning a blind eye to them may well be that the reason for his turning a blind eye to them was that at heart he was contemptuous of all these issues. In that case, the lesson here is the same as that in Acts 5:33-42 in the story of Gamaliel. Gamaliel was all for waiting to see how things would turn out before taking sides. Maybe it is of God, maybe not, wait and see before moving in their direction. There is an attitude, sadly enough, that refuses to become involved, one way or the other, in the gospel. One thing can be said about the Jews, and it is that they were whole hearted in their opposition to the gospel. They, at least, realised that you cannot be neutral. Neutral was what Gallio was trying to be, and it cannot be done. Sympathetic consideration is not enough. Full commitment is the only right thing.

188) 18:18-22

Two points call for comment in these brief verses, Paul's vow, and his desire to keep the feast in Jerusalem. It may well be asked whether there should have been any place in his thinking for the old ordinances and feasts. Was he not free from the law, and had he not taught this fiercely in his epistles? Ah, yes, Paul was free from the law, but he was prepared to be all things to all men, that he might win some, and this, it would seem, is the simplest explanation of what he did here. His heart was burdened for his fellow-kinsmen, the Jews, and he was prepared to go to any lengths to win them for Christ. It is a simple truth - and one amply expounded in Paul's own writings - that the Christian's liberty may often have to be limited by the law of love (cf 1 Cor 8:13), and it is therefore seldom so great in practice as it is in theory. It is the extent to which we are prepared to surrender our liberty for the sake of the salvation of others that is the real indication of how free we are in the gospel. As to the feast which he was intent on keeping, we are prompted to wonder whether the reason for this was his desire to point out the real significance of the ancient feasts in the light of their fulfilment in Christ and the gospel. This is what Jesus Himself did in His own celebration of the feasts, as we may see from John 7. Is it unlikely, then, that Paul should want to do the same, and interpret their true essence and meaning as pointing to, and being fulfilled in, Christ?

189) 18:23-28

The incident involving Apollos and Paul's new found friends, Aquila and Priscilla, is full of significance. Apollos was obviously an eloquent preacher, fervent in spirit, but there was something lacking for all that in his testimony, and this Aquila and Priscilla saw very clearly. And they helped him to a fulness he had never hitherto known. We may not know just what was the nature of this deepening in his experience, but we can recall at least two notable historical parallels to it, in the experience of John Wesley and Thomas Chalmers. With both these men it would seem that they had been preaching for some time before a definite experience overtook them in which the real fire of God came upon them, and there are good grounds for supposing that what they underwent was a genuine conversion. It is possible for men to preach knowing only the baptism of John, so to speak, and as such they need to have expounded to them the way of God more perfectly. The Church has known many faithful souls like Aquila and Priscilla whose wise and searching counsel has shaped and transformed the ministries of many men to the blessing of souls. This is not to be confused with the attitude which some people seem to think it is their duty to adopt, of going around putting ministers right and telling them how they should preach. God forbid! Is there no limit to the spiritual arrogance of presumptuous souls?

190) 19:1-7

The significance of these verses is seen in relation to the end of the previous chapter. It can hardly be coincidence that it follows immediately upon the reference to Apollos and his defective experience. Something was lacking in his teaching, and now here are some disciples who had sat under him who were lacking in the basic requirements of the faith. Why did Paul ask this question? Surely because his discerning eye saw that they lacked the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives sealing them and marking them off as true children of God. Their 'believing' had not brought about the operation of the Spirit. It is difficult, if this be so, to see how any real work of grace had taken place in them, and this is also substantiated by a true translation of Paul's words, 'Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed?' The AV translation would seem to suggest that Paul expected the reception of the Spirit to come after conversion, but this is misleading and apt to cause much confusion. It is clear from other passages of Scripture (e.g. Rom 8:9, 16, 1 Cor 12:13, John 3:5) that the Holy Spirit is the agent in conversion, and that where He is not, there is no salvation at all. His is a transforming Presence that cannot be mistaken.

191) 19:1-7

But something more requires to be said about the questions raised by this passage. On the face of it, it is true, Paul seems to be asking whether these men were in a state of grace or not. But it is not quite so simple as that. Bear in mind what is said about them. They are called disciples; they had been baptized; they were part of the movement associated with John the Baptist which, as we know, was a widespread movement of great power for repentance. They had therefore repented of their sins. And yet, they had not received the Holy Ghost! We could get very mixed up and confused here if we allowed ourselves to. But we need not, for this perplexing state of affairs in which these men stood is one which we have already encountered in our studies in Acts. Recall an earlier Note (Acts 1/2) in which we asked the question, 'When were Peter and the other disciples converted? At Pentecost? Or when Jesus said, Receive ye the Holy Ghost? Or when He called them saying, 'Follow Me'? What was said in this connection was that these are questions that cannot well be answered, for this reason: The disciples stood on the border between two dispensations, the old and the new, so that in the very nature of the case, their experience cannot be regarded in this respect as normative. They were, in one real sense, true believers in Christ before they received the Spirit at Pentecost. And yet, in another sense, they could not have been and done what they were and did as disciples without the Holy Spirit. Jesus Himself indicated as much at Caesarea Philippi, when He said to Peter, 'Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but My Father which is in heaven'. Now, in just the same way, experience in Acts is sometimes not to be taken as normative for the Church. The disciples here stand in the same position as the first disciples stood between the Resurrection and Pentecost. We shall turn to the implications of this in tomorrow's Note.

192) 19:1-7

Though we may be unable to state categorically, for the reasons stated in the previous note, whether these twelve men were true believers or not, it is open to us to learn some useful lessons from both possibilities. If we suppose for the sake of argument that they were believers, we must concede that they were not what they should have been. One recalls the story in Mark 8:22-26 of the blind man whom Jesus healed in two stages. We can hardly think that it was not within Christ's power to heal him outright, and His point was certainly not to suggest, by way of illustration, that the work of salvation was to take place in two stages (i.e. conversion first, then something else to follow, by which full salvation was reached), but rather to illustrate their own spiritual condition. See Mark 8:14-21 - 'Having eyes, see ye not?....How is it that ye do not understand?' They had companied with Him all this time, seen His miracles, received His teaching and yet, they could only, like the blind man, see 'men as trees walking'. Now in this kind of 'no-man's land' there are usually two reasons for such spiritual myopia. One is lack of knowledge, and the other is lack of will or intention. And for one or other of these two reasons some people seem to stick at the first stage of seeing men as trees walking. You would hesitate to say that they were blind, for they can see; yet you can hardly say they can see, for they are not seeing properly. They are neither the one thing nor the other, and you do not know where they are. The answer in the first instance is: instruction, teaching, illumination. Men need to be fully taught in all the wealth and riches that are theirs in the gospel. Impoverishment of experience always results from lack of understanding and grasp of the truth. The answer in the second instance - lack of will or intention - is also, first of all, illumination, to reveal the greatness of the gospel in such a way that it battles in power against the unwillingness of the heart to subdue and overcome it. And the sharp thrust of the gospel challenge comes with its summons to repent and bow the knee, and allow Christ to reign as King in the life. It is ever where He reigns that fulness comes (cf John 7:39).

193) 19:1-7

The other application of this word is of course to what is commonly called nominal Christianity, and to those men and women who believe that Christ is the Saviour and that He died and rose again, and yet there is something vital lacking in their experience. The one thing vital lacking: Nothing has ever really ignited in them - there is the form of godliness, but its power is absent from their lives. And the answer here also is teaching, knowledge, illumination. Faith - and we may also say, in this connection, the Holy Spirit - cometh by hearing. Of how many has it been true that, once brought under a true exposition of the gospel, they have entered into an entirely new experience of grace? One of the most touching and moving of all experiences in the ministry is to see the hearts of good, worthy, devout people opening like flowers to the sun when they hear the biblical message of salvation, and to realise that they have been unconsciously waiting for such a word to liberate and transform them, longing and yearning for it in their deepest being, and responding to it with an eagerness and joy that is almost indescribable, And we doubt not that Paul was deeply moved as the Spirit of God came in such liberating power on the twelve disciples at Ephesus that day.

194) 19:8-12

'Disputing' in 8 and 9 does not have the same unpleasant and provocative meaning in the original as it often has in English. It is the word translated in chapters 17 and 18 as 'reasoning', and portrays the Apostle in his invariable custom of appealing to the minds of his hearers. The effect of this ministry in Ephesus was remarkable. There were oppositions, of course - that is inevitable, as we have already seen, for the Word becomes a savour of life to some and of death to others – but it is clear that a notable work took place. Ephesus was a strategic centre in Asia Minor, being the junction of three great Roman roads, a city with much coming and going of people, and it became a centre of evangelism for the surrounding area. Special miracles are mentioned in 11, and we may see some significance in this. Miracles do not occur indiscriminately in either the Old Testament or the New, but only at specific and strategic times, to confirm the word of God's servants. The marvel is not that there are so many, but that there are so few recorded!

195) 19:8-12

If we take 20 along with these verses we may learn something of the extent and depth of this remarkable work that took place in Ephesus during Paul's stay there. 'So mightily grew the word of God and prevailed' - an apt summary indeed of all that happened! In the space of two years the name of Jesus was magnified in that heathen, idolatrous city, and the whole of Asia heard the word of the gospel. And it is perhaps not without significance that the record of this great word is prefaced by the story of how twelve disciples there entered their real heritage and destiny as children of God. Is there not a lesson here for us, and, in our thinking about spiritual awakening and renewal, may there not be something here for us to learn? The history of renewal has often shown such a pattern as this - a new consecration, a new anointing - this is what prefaces an accession of spiritual power in the life of the Church. It is this that gives meaning and significance to the emphasis throughout the chapter. That emphasis is a twofold one, and it will be very instructive for us to see the link between the two parts of it, and the relation of both to the message of fulness which the first part of the chapter teaches. On the one hand there is the uniform emphasis on the word of the gospel, and on preaching and proclaiming it (cf 9, 10, 13, 17, 20, 26). On the other, there is the emphasis, less obvious perhaps at first glance, but nonetheless decisive and fundamental, on the reality of the unseen world of spirits, the powers of darkness. It is this that lies behind the hardening of unbelief mentioned in 9, and the evil opposition to the gospel - and certainly, in the ensuing verses, the evil spirits are out into the open, both in the incident of the exorcists (13 ff) and in the terrible riot that climaxed Paul's ministry at Ephesus (23 ff). Here, then, are all the characteristic marks of a true work of God: the preaching of the Word, central to everything, the impact and influence of that Word on the lives of men, and the encounter with the dark underworld of spirits, the principalities and powers that hold the world in thrall, and whose power is challenged by Christ in the gospel. Always where there is permanent consecration of life and the fulness of the Spirit in personal experience, this is the pattern that emerges.

196) 19:13-20

This is a curious and startling experience, introducing us, as said in the previous note, to the unseen underworld of spirits. We are reminded of Paul's statement in 1 Cor 1.5:32 about fighting with wild beasts at Ephesus, and wonder whether the reference is to his encounters with demonism. The Jewish exorcists thought to make capital out of the gospel preached by Paul, and use the name of Jesus in their efforts to cast out demons. Such was their blindness that they used that name as a magical charm. The effect on the demon-possessed was dramatic and frightening. Not only did the 'charm' not work for them, but the evil spirit moved the possessed men to attack them violently, and they fled naked and wounded from the house. This should teach us the reality of the powers of darkness and the folly of meddling with them without adequate spiritual armour and resources. But it raises an arresting question and it is this. Jesus' authority was something that was recognised by the spirits, and Paul's name as a servant of Christ was also known and respected. Are we known to the spirit world as forces to be reckoned with? Have we left our mark on the underworld by the inroads we have made upon the kingdom of darkness? A man may be well known as an ecclesiastical statesman and theologian, but his ministry will not have counted for much if this cannot be said of him. It is something, after all, to be on the devil's blacklist!

197) 19:21-41

This is a long reading, but we cannot well divide the passage up for it is all of a piece, and the lessons we gather from it are general, applying to the whole story. A spiritual movement that led to the burning of sorcerers' books (19) was bound to cause reaction. As long as religion remains in the cloister, it will be tolerated and even smiled at, but when it comes out into the world and upsets the economics of society, all hell is let loose. Demetrius saw only too clearly the implications of Paul's continued preaching, and set to with demoniacal hatred to stir up oppositions against him. The history of revivals shows that vested interests have frequently arrayed themselves against the work of the gospel. The drink trade in the nineteenth century, for example, showed itself a bitter opponent of the great mission movement because of the large numbers who through conversion were delivered from the grip of liquor. In this connection one wonders what would be the attitude today of a government that draws so many millions yearly into its exchequer from drink, to a movement of revival such as swept England in the eighteenth century! We may see, then, from this ugly situation, that the demonic - for who could doubt the sinister element in the uproar that ensued? - has a moral root. When the gospel presumes to challenge 'vested interests' of whatever kind, either in business or in personal life, trouble always lies ahead.

198) 19:21-41

There are two lines along which comment and interpretation can be made on the story of the riot, one in relation to the impact the gospel makes on communities, the other the impact on individual lives. We look at the first of these in our note for today. Consider what is said in 23. The reference here is to 'the Christian way', and what is meant is that the impact of the message Paul preached, and the new life and the new way he offered, was so great that it caused an uproar. The word 'stir' is entirely inadequate to translate the meaning of Paul's Greek here. Uproar, confusion, disturbance - these are worthier renderings. It is a word used to describe mental disturbance and confusion, which as we know can sometimes be very violent indeed. The disturbance, then, arose, because there was a collision between two diametrically opposed ways of life, and the sinister element is very evident in what developed. It would have needed little to make the mob go berserk and tear the apostles limb from limb. One recalls the vast gatherings in pre-war Germany, when Hitler swayed his people to hysterical frenzy. Here also was a clear case of mob-hysteria. Some were crying one thing, some another, but most did not know why they were come together. They were confused. This, then, is the mark of the devil's work - the spread of confusion. Demonic disturbance is essentially irrational, and this is why it is often so dangerous. The town clerk's judgment in 40, 'there being no cause', underlines this irrationality. It is in fact the utter groundlessness of the charges and objections that is underlined. There was no ground at all, except the one fatal fact - the challenge to their way of life. This should be borne in mind more often than it sometimes is when criticisms of the Church's work and witness are levelled against our testimony.

199) 19:21-41

The other application of the story of the riot is to individual lives. Often the riot and tumult and disturbance are caused, and take place within a man's heart and spirit, rather than outwardly. And all that has been said about the riot in Ephesus is valid and true on this level also. We pointed out earlier that Paul's word 'stir' in 23 is one which in its verbal form could be used to describe mental disturbance and confusion. This is a frequent and common condition in people who have been challenged by the gospel. For the gospel cuts right across their long-accepted way of life - it is the collision, as we have said, between two diametrically opposed principles. And the reaction within a man is often very ugly indeed. He is not usually very willing to recognise what it is that is causing the disturbance. He does not say to himself, 'I am reacting against the gospel and against Christ'. What he says is, 'I cannot stand that man's preaching: it is far too personal: he has no right to say such things; religion is something between man and his Maker'. Or, 'His irritating mannerisms drive to distraction', or, 'He is too emotional', or 'He preaches far too long' - and so on and so on. Furthermore, the confusion evident in Ephesus is just as evident also on the personal level. Consider, for example, the RSV rendering of Mark.6:20, describing Herod's reaction to John the Baptist's preaching: 'He was much perplexed, yet he heard him gladly'. One commentator translates it, 'He was at his wit's end'. This, of very necessity, must be so, and for this reason: we are made in the image of God and so even in our sin we do not cease to be destined for Him, and therefore there is a perpetual conflict between the urge in us to rebel against Him and the desire for His peace. It is hard to resist one's true destiny.

200) 19:21-41

And, like the situation in Ephesus, there is no cause whereby an account can be given of the uproar and furore that arises within a man - no legitimate cause, that is. There is no need for it, and it would not occur but for this one fact, that the gospel hurls a challenge at a man's way of life, disputes it, and outrightly summons him to a radical change. Let us recall Demetrius's words, 'By this craft we have our wealth' - and the gospel was challenging it, calling it in question. That is the rub. 'By this....we have our wealth' - this, whatever it be, our way of life - and now we are summoned to a crucifixion! Here, then, is the explanation of the tension, the confusion, the disturbance, and often the madness, within the human heart. It is love of the gain of 'self', that by which men live, and it is this that is seen to be threatened by the gospel. It is the unwillingness to let go of self that is the cause of the trouble. It is always 'this way', the Christian way, against 'our way', and it is here that the surrender must be made and the capitulation effected.

'Is there a thing beneath the sun
That strives with Thee my heart to share?'

As long as ever this is true, there will be turmoil and disturbance in our hearts in the presence of the gospel.

201) 19:21-41

Not even when all hell seemed to be let loose was Paul's spirit daunted. On the contrary he even attempted to enter in to the people (30). We can only marvel at the courage of this intrepid warrior of the faith. We have before quoted the saying that 'a man is immortal until his work is done', and this conviction may have lent a fearlessness to him that nothing could shake. We who are conditioned by so many self-regarding considerations might well pray for some of Paul's spirit in our service for Christ. One last lesson may be elicited from the closing verses of the passage. The disorder was indescribable while it lasted, but the providential intervention of the town clerk caused it to subside, and it seems in fact to have subsided remarkably quickly, as if some invisible hand had clamped down upon it. We think that this is the true explanation, and call to mind Peter's word about the devil going about like a roaring lion (1 Pet 5:9) - 'whom resist stedfast in the faith'. It is as we adopt an attitude of resistance against him, refusing in the faith of Christ to budge an inch or to be panicked into flight, that the victory of Christ became ours. Paul obviously believed unto victory in the face of this uproar, and the action of the town clerk was God's answer to his faith. This should encourage us in time of trouble and opposition in Christian service. Storms have a way of subsiding when our attitude to them is one of steady and clear-sighted faith.

202) 20:1-4

The period of time covered by these verses may well be considerable, at least a matter of months. The narrative is clearly very condensed, and it would be easy to skip through the brief passage in our desire to get on with the story, without noticing its full significance. For there is more compressed into these verses than most men accomplish in their entire ministry. What a wealth there is in the simple phrases, 'when he had gone over these parts' and, 'and had given them much exhortation'. What thoroughness this wise master-builder showed, laying foundations, building gold, silver and precious stones into men's spiritual lives (cf 1 Cor 3). 'Exhortation' is more than mere hortatory words; it embraces the fulness of the spirit and indicates a full-orbed ministry. This patient upbuilding of the Word of God is not something that hits the headlines, but it is what lies behind every forward movement in the Church's life. But there is something even more impressive here, and it is this: on the one hand, 3 records a plot against Paul's life; on the other, 4 tells of a number of believers who accompanied him to Asia. There is a vital connection between these two seemingly unconnected statements. The statement about the plot is brief and clear. But do we have any conception what this must have meant to the Apostle? 'In perils by mine own countrymen' is how he elsewhere describes it. He had already passed through innumerable hazards in his journeyings - one recalls the stress at Corinth, and the Lord's reassurance to him in midst of it, and also the riot he had just left at Ephesus. What emotional strain that must have put upon him. And now this on top of all, and so soon. Was there to be no respite for him at all, ever? He might have been forgiven for feeling an unutterable weariness descend upon his spirit. It was not that he was afraid to die, but to live in face of such continuing and unremitting pressures is often far harder than to die. There may be an echo of these things in the famous passage in 2 Cor 4:8 ff, 'We are troubled on every side....always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus....' Such is the background here against which the significance of 4 needs to be understood.

203) 20:1-4

Here are some words by Dr James Denney which underline the essential nature of the sufferings of God's people: 'Suffering, for the Christian, is not an accident: it is a divine appointment, and a divine opportunity. To wear out life in the service of Jesus is to open it to the entrance of Jesus' life; it is to receive, in all its alleviations, in all its renewals, in all its deliverances, a witness to His resurrection. Perhaps it is only by accepting this service, with the daily dying it demands, that the witness can be given to us; and the 'life of Jesus' on His throne may become incomprehensible and unreal in proportion as we decline to bear about in our bodies His dying....Paul does not say (in 2 Cor 4) that he bears about in his body the death of Jesus, but His dying, the process which produces death. The sufferings which come upon him daily in his work for Jesus are gradually killing him; the pains, the perils, the spiritual pressure, the excitement of danger and the excitement of deliverance, are wearing out his strength, and soon he must die....But that was not all. In spite of the dying, he was not dead. Perpetually in peril, he had a perpetual series of escapes; perpetually at his wits' end, his way perpetually opened up for him. What was the explanation of that? It was the life of Jesus manifesting itself in his body. The life of Jesus can only mean the life which Jesus lives now at God's right hand; and these repeated escapes of the Apostle, these restorations of his courage, are manifestations of that life; they are, so to speak, a series of resurrections. Paul's communion with Jesus is not only in His dying, but in His rising again; he has the evidence of the Resurrection because he has its power, present with him in these constant deliverances and renewals. Nay, the very purpose of his sufferings and perils is to provide occasion for the manifestation of this resurrection life.'

204) 20:1-4

Looked at from one point of view, the experience Denney comments on is all very noble and thrilling and moving; but we must not forget its painful and costly side, or the toll it takes of those who endure it. Remember Elijah and his great distress and despair after Mount Carmel. Was he not down at rock bottom when he cried, 'I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life. It is enough. Now let me die. 'Would Paul never have felt like this? He was too human not to; he was no Stoic, but felt things very deeply. But a man who lives like this is never left alone, even on the human level. For he ever produces others likeminded to himself. They are the fruit of his labours and his travail. 'Out of the presses of pain cometh the soul's best wine', says the poet, and how truly he speaks! And so, significantly, there came with Paul into Asia these men, hand-picked fruit, souls for his hire, the harvest of the costly sowing of the seed of the gospel, and now bound to him in a deep personal loyalty. This has greater importance than we might think. We owe this loyalty to those who have been the means of blessing to our lives, and God does not take it lightly when we neglect to honour our obligations in this direction. Some of God's dearest servants suffer needless distress and hurt - not to say desolation - at the hands of those who forget all too soon the time and travail spent on their spiritual welfare. But to hurt them is to hurt Christ, and experience has shown that it does not go well with the ungrateful and the callous. They sometimes have to learn the grace of thankfulness the hard way (see 2 Tim 4:14-16).

205) 20:5-12

An apt title for this passage might be 'Sunday in Troas', and what a Sunday it proved to be! The story of Eutychus should certainly be taken as miraculous. It is plainly stated that he was taken up dead (9), and Paul's word, 'his life is in him', must be understood as being the result of his embracing the lifeless body. It is very likely that the action of Elijah (1 Kings 17:21) and Elisha (2 Kings 4:34) was in his mind, impelling him to the same procedure with Eutychus. We need not wonder at the miracle; the living power of God had broken in an especial way in those days, and what Jesus had done with Lazarus, Paul did, in His Name, with Eutychus. The amazing thing is that the believers took this astonishing happening so completely in their stride, and returned to hear the preaching of the word by Paul. This tells us two things: they were used to the supernatural, and could accommodate their minds to its continual operation among them; and, what is even more important, they were able to hold things in their proper perspective and proportion. With them the 'miraculous' was regarded as almost incidental to the real purpose of the gospel, which was the proclamation of the Word. This was the admirable thing about the early Church, as it is indeed the hallmark of the mature in every age - a sense of balance, and an ability to keep unessentials in their proper place, and to refuse to allow them to displace the really important matters. The Church would have been saved from many a distorted emphasis if she had been more concerned to encourage this spiritual grace in her members.

206) 20:5-12

Another lesson - and here we must recognise the link and connection with what we have said about the opening verses of the chapter - is that the miracle performed on the young man was a symbol and a sacrament of Paul's gospel, in the sense that it was a divine vindication of the word that he preached and the kind of life he lived. In Mark 16:20 we read that the disciples 'went forth and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following'. The incident recorded here is an evidence of these words, and the truth of them. It was the reward of faithfulness for Paul. He believed in a God that raised the dead so utterly and completely that it was no wonder and no surprise to him that God should do so. What is more, it would serve as a sacrament of Paul's message to the disciples at Troas, in that it would confirm them in their faith that what he was saying to them was no idle chatter but real and living truth. Above all, consider what a superb illustration it gives of the power of the gospel in spiritual life - indeed it was simply the shadow and token of the basic gospel truth of regeneration by the Word and Spirit of God. It was this that these disciples at Troas were aware of, and it was to them so incomparably greater than physical resuscitation that they wanted to hear more about it from the Apostle, and did not allow the Eutychus miracle to distract them!

207) 20:13-21

These verses lead into one of the most noble utterances in the entire New Testament. Paul, in conference with the Ephesian elders summoned to meet him at Miletus, reviews his life, conduct, ministry among the Ephesians during the three years and more that he spent among them, and in so doing gives a deeply moving portrait of a faithful servant of God. As such, it is a telling and challenging message for all who are called to minister the Word, and doubtless one could spend much time in the passage from this point of view. But not all are called to preach, and we cannot confine our study in this way. Those who minister know this passage well and, please God, we allow it to search our hearts and convict our consciences again and again. If people have ministers in their prayers, this is what they should pray that these ministers will be among them, for Christ's sake. But there are other, more general, lessons here, and it is these that must chiefly occupy our attention. The whole passage is a revelation of the nature of the gospel, and of the heart of God. What is it that strikes one most forcibly, that stands out most graphically, in reading the passage? Is it not the over-mastering concern that Paul shows for the souls of the Ephesians? What is the explanation of this great earnestness of spirit, his tears (19, 31), his faithfulness to the whole counsel of God, as if it were unthinkable that any part of it could be withheld from them (20, 27, 31), the burning out of body and soul in the work, the carelessness of life itself, if only the work be accomplished (24), the overflow of prayer from his heart (36)? Just this: for Paul, salvation was so great a thing, so eternally important, that nothing else mattered - nothing. This is the spirit that permeates the whole passage.

208) 20:13-21

Paul speaks first, in 18-21, of his life and character. We see his consistency and steadfastness in 18 - and this is one of the most impressive of his characteristics. There was a rocklike strength and rugged stability about him that is reflected in all we read of him in the New Testament. A great tenderness of spirit shines through 19 - Paul felt the woes of men as he preached the riches of Christ to them, and a Christ-like compassion filled his heart towards them. Indeed, we could say of him - to use a phrase that is perhaps trite on too many lips, although rightly understood a holy fire burns in it - that he had a passion for souls. To him the gospel was so overwhelming in its reality and its implications so tremendous, that he was prepared to go to any lengths to win men to Christ. His faithfulness to the commission he had received is reflected in 20 - he kept back nothing that was profitable. Paul could never have been what we call a popular preacher; he was too painstakingly thorough and radical in proclaiming the message of the cross. He was prepared to antagonise and alienate his hearers through very faithfulness to the highest. He would not lower the cost of discipleship for any man. Many a time he paid dearly for this attitude, in hurt and pain to his sensitive heart. His teaching is summed up in 21 - repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. What challenge these verses throw out, to preacher and witness alike! Do we come anywhere near the standard Paul set himself?

209) 20:22-24

These verses speak of Paul's sufferings and difficulties in the gospel, and these follow from the previous verses. All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution. We see something of the constraint that gripped him in the service of the gospel, as he disregarded the warnings given by the prophets in the various fellowships as to what awaited and could befall him at Jerusalem (23). He was able to face with detachment of spirit the possibility of suffering and even death (24), so great was the over-mastering passion and concern in him to finish his course with joy and discharge his commission in the gospel. For him the all-important thing was to finish well, and for this he was willing to spend and be spent in preaching and ministering the Word. It is recorded of Martin Luther, when he was warned not to go to Worms, that he said, 'I will go thither though there should be devils on every housetop.' He also was driven by a great passion; for him, as for Paul, life was expendable, if only the cause that lay at his heart could be furthered. A like spirit inspired the intrepid missionaries of our own day to take the gospel to the Auca Indians in Ecuador, at the cost of their lives. One of them wrote: 'Am I ignitable? God deliver me from the dread asbestos of "other things". Saturate me with the oil of the Spirit that I may be a flame. But flame is transient, often short-lived. Canst thou bear this, my soul - short life? In time- there dwells the Spirit of the great Short-lived, Whose zeal for God's house consumed Him. Make me Thy fuel, flame of God.' There could be no better commentary on this passage than these words.

210) 20:25-32

Paul's parting counsel to the Ephesian elders was a warning against 'grievous wolves' (29), heretics that would lead believers away from the truth, and it is significant that he proceeds to commend them to God and to the word of His grace, for this is the only real safeguard against heresy. In the history of the Church it has ever been when believers have been ignorant of the Word that they have been misled into error. The tragedy in our day of the increase in activity of sects like Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah Witnesses and Christadelphians is that they are trading on the ignorance of so many worshippers. A generation has arisen in Scotland with only a fragmentary knowledge of the Bible and of the basic truths of the gospel, it is scarcely surprising that they are so completely overpowered by the assured grasp of the Bible shown by the members of these sects. In this respect, the great need is not so much for evangelism but for teaching. Truth is the only effective counteractive to error, and truth is something that must be taught in Scotland today, if we are to prevent a widespread defection from the true faith. An informed and instructive membership in the Churches would prove to be an effective answer to this and many another problems in the religious life of our land.

211) 20:33-38

It is a touching testimony that Paul gives in the closing verses of the chapter, and they well express the principle that was the keynote of his whole life - self-giving. On the Damascus Road he gave himself over without reserve to Christ, and from that moment the movement of his life was outward toward God and men. It is impressive to see how this attitude wrought in him a spirit of detachment in his heart. He had attained the true riches in secret fellowship with the Lord, and no others had claim upon him. He had a truly noble heart, which no earthly affection could drag down. To be in a position where he wanted nothing but Christ, meant for him to be at leisure from himself enough to give himself to others. This is a secret worth learning; indeed to learn it truly is to have grasped all that is of final importance in Christian life. It is life indeed.

The Apostle quotes, to substantiate his words, a saying not elsewhere recorded in the New Testament, but one which was obviously current in the early Church. It is more blessed to give than to receive because it is more Christ-like. He gave Himself to the uttermost, until there was no more to give. Could there, ultimately, be any other pattern for us who name His Name?

212) 21:1-6

This chapter continues the record of Paul's journey to Jerusalem. An important point arises in 4, but we shall leave this for the moment, and take it up in tomorrow's note, in conjunction with similar references in later verses. In the meantime we pay particular attention to the significance of the phrase 'with wives and children' in 5. This was a memorable, never-to-be-forgotten occasion as the believers of Tyre bade farewell to the great apostle, and to include their children in such an experience would certainly leave an indelible impression on their hearts and minds. This raises a matter of very considerable importance in relation to the training of the young. Modern methods tend towards segregating various age groups because, it is said, children cannot be expected to understand teaching designed for adult minds. This is very plausible, but in fact it has led to a situation in the Church in which it is now quite possible for a child to grow up within the life of a congregation and reach adult life almost without ever being in a regular Church service, the various youth groups having become substitutes for Church in their lives. We take leave on scriptural grounds to disagree with this practice. Being in Church, and sharing in the worship of the congregation, is an essential part of a child's training. Of course there are many things that children cannot possibly understand but this does not matter. Few of the children in the company that sent Paul on his way could have known what was happening, but think of the impression left on their minds by what they saw and heard! That is the important thing. It is the conditioning of young minds that tells so much for the future. One has only to think, for example, of some who were children at the time of the 1859 revival and witnessed the awe-inspiring working of the Holy Spirit to realise what a lasting influence for good these scenes had upon them. Mackay of Uganda, and Chalmers of New Guinea were boys in 1859, and who shall say how their boyhood experiences shaped and directed their future destiny on the mission-field?

213) 21:7-14

We now take 4 along with 11 and discuss the very real problem raised by these verses. The background of the passage is as follows: Paul, leaving Miletus, made his way by ship to Syria, landing at Tyre. There he and his companions met with some believers who said through the Spirit that he should not go up to Jerusalem. This was the first warning, and it was followed at Caesarea by a second and more dramatic one, through the prophet Agabus, who acted his message and warned Paul in the strongest terms that imprisonment awaited him in Jerusalem. It was the signal for earnest entreaty by the saints that he would change his plans and not go to what seemed a certain fate. His determination to go remained unchanged, however, and the problem that faces us is whether he was right or wrong in his decision. Was Paul being stubbornly determined? Was there a blind spot in him which made him impervious to advice when his mind was made up? And are we to say that his subsequent imprisonment in Jerusalem was an indication and proof that he had taken the wrong step? The chief difficulty for interpretation lies in 4. Obviously if these words are true, the Spirit cannot have been leading Paul to go; and if the Spirit was leading Paul to go, there cannot have been a direct command from the Spirit through these disciples not to go. The Spirit does not contradict Himself. What is said in 4 must therefore have been a conclusion come to by the disciples on the basis of what had been made clear by the Spirit would happen to Paul. We shall continue this thought tomorrow.

214) 21:7-14

The Apostle's friends could see the consequences of his going to Jerusalem, and wanted him to avoid them; he alone, it seems, was prepared to believe that the suffering could be in the plan and will of God for him, for the furtherance of the gospel. This is what explains the conflict of emotions in 13. They were motivated by love for Paul, he by love for Christ. And from this we may learn that the greatest temptations and often the deepest hurts come not from the low affections but from the high that are not high enough. As Dean Farrar once said, 'Those whose intentions towards us are best are the most dangerous to us when their intentions are merely human. How often, alas, are a man's real foes those of his own household. His friends who love him best become, in their worldliness, his worst enemies. They drag him down from the heights of self-sacrifice to the vulgar, the conventional, the comfortable.' We may gather from the intensity of Paul's words in 13 how much this attitude tore his heart - and constitutes a temptation to take an easier way. Can we not hear an echo here of our Lord's temptation in the wilderness - 'a kingdom without a cross, Jesus'? Their final acquiescence in 14 seems to indicate their recognition that he was right, and this, we believe, was confirmed in 23:11. God was with him, and was in the trial and affliction.

215) 21:7-14

We cannot leave these verses without considering Paul's wonderful words in 13b.

In one sense they breathe the spirit of the great utterance to the Ephesian elders in the previous chapter, which we saw reflected his passion for souls, but they go behind this, and go deeper, in that which explains the passion for souls - the passion for Christ. Can we not hear the ring of pride and joy and love in Paul's words as he speaks of the name of the Lord Jesus? Here is the heart and secret of everything that was of final importance in Paul's experience. Well might he call himself the 'bond-slave of Jesus Christ', for Christ was everything to him! To understand this fully it is necessary to grasp just how deeply the gospel had touched the Apostle's life. He had found in it not only the peace and the forgiveness of God - and this was a salvation glorious in its wonder and joy - but he had also learned what it cost God to give him this inestimable gift, and it was surely this that fired his heart with such devotion. That the infinite, eternal and unchangeable God should have come down and become incarnate as a God of unutterable love and, above all, suffering love for our sakes - this is what captured the love and inspiration of his whole being. For he had looked into that suffering Face, and seen love written there, a love vaster, deeper, more inexorable than he could ever have believed existed. Well might the Psalmist say, 'There is forgiveness with Thee, that Thou mayest be feared', for it is the most fearful and terrible thing on earth to look into the face of the Crucified and let these suffering eyes tell out the nature and the cost of redeeming love. This is what made Paul ready to die for the name of the Lord Jesus at Jerusalem.

216) 21:15-30

The storm-clouds that had been forecast by the prophets were not long in breaking on Paul's head and, significantly enough, the issue was one which had stirred opposition against him wherever he went - Jewish legalism. It is clear that his arrival in Jerusalem was a source of considerable embarrassment to the leaders of the Church there, for notwithstanding his account of the Lord's wonderful working among the Gentiles, which was politely brushed aside by them, he was urged to comply with some ceremonial regulations (24) for the sake of peace and to obviate any possible dissension in what was sure to be a delicate situation. The embarrassment of the Church is something that we ought to look at very closely. Consider the extraordinary statement in 20, 'They glorified the Lord, and said, "Thou seest, brother...."' So much for their interest in the exploits of the gospel in Europe and Asia! When one thinks of the story that Paul had to tell, it seems almost incredible that the Church of Pentecost should have taken such an attitude. Paul was too uncomfortable a person to have around. He was too living, too disturbing a factor to be introduced into the comfortable 'status-quo' of the Church at Jerusalem, and he needed in their eyes to be 'toned down'. Nothing could underline more graphically than this the failure of the Church. Little wonder that the spiritual initiative passed from Jerusalem to Antioch for the onward march of the gospel.

217) 21:15-30

We are not told what Paul thought of this deplorable attitude of the Jerusalem believers, but he did comply with the request they made to him. But in the event, he might have spared himself the trouble, for the reaction at his appearance was immediate and unmistakable. We might be tempted to wonder whether he was wise to have allowed himself to be led into doing this, but there is another more important lesson that should occupy our attention. It is this: the Jews reacted violently against Paul because of his radical gospel teaching. Why were they prepared to tolerate James and the others in Jerusalem without molesting them? There can be only one answer. The Church in Jerusalem was in at least some measure compromising her testimony by failing to take a definite stand on the matter of the law. They had been careful not to offend Jewish susceptibilities, and as a result the Jews were prepared to tolerate their continued existence. But there is a price to be paid for spiritual compromise and, as we saw in the previous note, it cost the Church at Jerusalem its leadership in the things of God. The Church that once saw Pentecostal effusion became a spiritual backwater. It is a solemn thought. Compromise is a deadly thing. It was not a good thing that the Jerusalem Christians did not raise a riot among the Jews by their testimony. So far as apostolic practice was concerned, riots and revivals went hand in hand. The upshot here was that Paul stood alone in the hour of danger, when he might have - and should have - had the support and help of the Church. The lesson for us is that it is possible to remove the offence of the cross from one's testimony and so betray the gospel. We should not be too concerned about treading on people's toes!

218) 21:15-30

The background to this perplexing and distressing situation is that in the early days of the Church, the Faith existed within the context of Judaism. Then, owing to certain factors, it began to widen its influence to include the Gentiles, and it was this that raised the problems and tensions. For then two emphases developed, the Judaistic, which was narrow and exclusive in its views, and withal deeply prejudiced, and the more liberal school as represented by Stephen (Acts 7). This latter became significantly stronger, with Paul as Stephen's successor, and the tensions came to a head in Acts 15, in the first 'Council' meeting at Jerusalem. Now the issue here was not so much whether the Mosaic Law should be observed, as how it should be observed, and in what spirit. This is the crux of the matter, and it is this that explains the passage and also Paul's and the Jerusalem believers' attitude. Consider the following Scriptures: Gal 2:5 (where Paul's teaching on the believer's freedom from the law is seen to be a central point in his gospel; to oblige Titus to be circumcised would have made salvation depend on the keeping of the law); 1 Cor 9:19-21 (where Paul says 'To the Jews I became as a Jew....', thus seeming to contradict the position he maintains in Gal 2:5); Rom 14:1-13 (where he advocates tolerance and forbearance with the weak brother). A careful study of the implications of these passages will serve to explain the contradiction which these verses in Acts 21 seem to contain, with Paul appearing to observe the law he teaches elsewhere is superseded. We shall try to indicate the significance of this in tomorrow's Note.

219) 21:15-30

The outcome of the Church's deliberations in the 'Council' at Jerusalem (Acts 15) was that victory in principle went to the true gospel of salvation by grace through faith alone, with a 'working' compromise on the question of meats offered to idols etc. (Acts 15:20,29) for the weaker brethren's sake. Now, the Jerusalem Church wanted Paul to 'keep the law' because they were legalist at heart, and in bondage to the law that the gospel had in fact superseded. Paul agreed to do so, not because he was legalist, not because he was compromising the situation, but because he was considering the weaker brother (cf Romans 14, 1 Cor 8). Now, even this is not always successful, though sometimes it is, in keeping the peace. But the attempt must be made (cf 'As much as lieth in you, live at peace with all men'). And Paul made that attempt here, and we need to see the nature of the spirit in which he did so. The guidelines for this he lays down in Rom 15:1-7: 'Christ pleased not Himself'. This is consecration in action, and the working out of his readiness to 'die' at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. Paul really 'died' spiritually in this experience: died to his liberty in Christ for the sake of others, and for the love of men. Again it is his passion for souls coming out with great and unmistakeable clarity. He was prepared to be all things to all men, in order to gain some - in this case, his own countrymen.

220) 21:31-40

We should note in what great detail the historian Luke describes Paul's arrest, imprisonment and trial. It is striking how this parallels the account of our Lord's arrest, trial and crucifixion in the gospel that bears Luke's name. One wonders whether there is a conscious comparison between the two. One recalls how Luke begins Acts by referring to his gospel as the record of all Jesus began to do and to teach - the implication being that in Acts the story is continued. And we have seen sufficient in Acts already to realise that the pattern of Christ's life and death 'repeats' itself and is reflected in the experience of those who take up the cross and follow Him. The very words of the multitudes as they pressed for Christ's crucifixion are echoed in relation to Paul - 'Away with him!'. It can hardly be a coincidence that this should be so. And we may remember that Paul has just said he is willing to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. It is well, then, that we should think of all that happened here in the context of Paul's sharing of the sufferings of Christ, and as such we need not doubt but that, as he bore in his own body the dying of the Lord Jesus, the life also of Jesus was manifest in him, to the challenge and blessing of others.

221) 21:31-40

In the hour of extremity Paul was rescued by the Roman authorities. This was not the only occasion on which he was thus indebted to them, as we have already seen, and it prompts us to reflect on God's merciful provision of properly constituted law and order. We have almost forgotten to think clearly in this matter, and we are of the opinion that a careful study of the teaching of Scripture on the meaning and function of law would serve to clear up many misunderstandings in the discussion of some notable contemporary problems such as the controversy about capital punishment or that about nuclear disarmament. The law is an expression of the Divine will, and those who administer it are instruments of the Divine purpose. This has nothing to do with whether they are Christians or not, and belongs to the realm of common, not saving, grace. The chief captain was just as surely a servant of God in the discharge of his duty, as Paul was in the preaching of the gospel in Asia and Europe, and God made use of His own ordinance to save Paul from harm and danger. Since this is so, no Christian need hesitate to have recourse to law for personal protection - it is a false piety which thinks it worldly and unchristian to do so - or to support governments which decide to employ nuclear weapons as deterrents to any possible aggression. The powers that be, as Paul points out in Romans 13:4, bear the sword for God and stand over against the aggressor as a restraint against evil, and no discussion of this grave contemporary problem should omit a full consideration and understanding of the place of law as such. It is all too easy to be one-sided and unbalanced, not to say emotional, in our thinking.

222) 22:1-21

There is so much in this chapter that we must take some time to study it in some detail. Its subject matter is Paul's conversion on the Damascus Road and this we have already dealt with in 9:1 ff. On another occasion he also gave a similar account of this great experience (26:1 ff). There is a particular value in comparing the three chapters, for there are marked variations to be seen, and some have wondered at this. But the two later chapters belong to very different sets of circumstances, with different aims in view, and naturally the emphases would not be the same in both cases. Here, Paul's concern is to show his true orthodoxy as a Jew. The disturbance in the previous chapter was caused by the accusation that he was violating in his teaching the meaning of Jewry. He is intent therefore upon refuting the accusation, hence his speaking in the Hebrew tongue (2), his claim to be a Jew (3), the record of his Jewish training at the feet of Gamaliel (3), his emphasis on the orthodoxy of Ananias (12) and his own worshipping in the Temple after his conversion (17). The point he was concerned to make was that his new experience as a Christian confirmed and fulfilled the real intention of the Hebrew calling and religion. This is a very important point, and the next note will have something further to say about it.

223) 22:1-21

'I am....a Jew' (3), said Paul. What, then, is the significance of the Jew? We must understand the meaning of the Jews' calling to appreciate the force of Paul's argument, and we need to turn back to Gen 12:3 as our starting point. God chose Abraham and his family and made them His peculiar people, not for themselves, but as an instrument whereby He could finally reveal Himself to the world in love and mercy, through them to the world! This was to be the pattern and intention of God. But Israel as a whole was so completely blind to her real calling that she constantly reacted against the very idea of other nations sharing in the blessings of the covenant which God had made with them. Israel was a renegade people; she misinterpreted her own Scriptures, and summed up all her tortuous history in the crucifixion of her Messiah, through Whom the final revelation of God's salvation was to come. Paul said, in Rom 2:28, 'he is not a Jew who is one outwardly', and this is really his point here. He was a true Jew, for he fulfilled the real purpose of the Jews' calling by being an instrument of the Divine grace and mercy to the world, as the Apostle to the Gentiles. It was he, not they, who could claim to have fulfilled the intention of verses such as Isa 42:6 and 49:1-7, which declare so plainly, for those who have eyes to see, the meaning of their election of God. It is against this background that we must understand his testimony before the people at this point.

224) 22:1-21

There is a very interesting juxtaposition of phrases in 3 and 4 - 'zealous toward God....and I persecuted'. So this was his zeal for God a harsh, destructive, negative thing. It was intent on breaking down and demolishing. Now, in any work of religion a certain amount of 'breaking down' is necessarily involved before spiritual 'reconstruction' can begin, but when there is nothing else, no constructive alternative, no 'more excellent way', it is a zeal that is sadly and dangerously misdirected. Any common labourer can knock down a building with a cross bar or battering ram, but it needs a wise master-builder to put one up. Some people conceive it as their mission in life to condemn what is wrong in others - but it is a fruitless occupation, which produces nothing but unpleasantness and hurt. It is so easy to criticise. There are those in the Christian life who gain for themselves this reputation, and it is surely an unenviable one. Few lives accomplish less for the gospel than they do. They are barren and bring reproach on the Name they bear. We ought to be more constantly on guard than we often are lest our zeal for God inadvertently becomes a tool for Satan's willing hands!

225) 22:1-21

When we compare 9 with 9:7 and 26:14, it might seem that there was a contradiction in the account of what happened on the Damascus Road, but the contradiction is surely more apparent than real. The explanation must be that Paul's companions heard the sound of a voice, but only he knew what was said. The communication was for him alone. An interesting parallel may be seen in John 12:28, 29, when God spoke audibly from heaven to our Lord, and some called it thunder, while others said an angel spoke. It is certainly true - and this is part of the mystery of grace - that in the soul's encounter with Christ it stands utterly alone. It is an experience which no-one can share with another; each man is cut off from the rest of humankind, and in that dread isolation of spirit he may, like Paul, find the fellowship that banishes alone-ness for ever from his life. In the notes on chapter 9 we referred to 'the blindness of grace' (11). It was the glory of the risen and exalted Christ that shone upon Paul that day, and his eyesight was really affected by the majesty and brightness of it, but this is certainly also parabolic of his subsequent experience, for he no longer had eyes for anything or anyone but Christ. The world and all else was spoiled for him, and that is as it should be. He who has once gazed upon the glory of the Son of God will never see the same again.

226) 22:1-21

The experience recorded in 1:7-21 is not related elsewhere, and has valuable lessons to teach us. Firstly Paul's point, in what he said to the Lord, was that the startling nature of his conversion and the fact that he was an ex-persecutor of the Church must surely make his witness and preaching in Jerusalem especially effective. But Christ said, "No". It is not the fact that a man is an ex-persecutor - or, to bring the matter up to date, an ex-gangster, or an ex-operatic singer, or an ex-pugilist - that determines the effectiveness of witness or preaching, and to think that it should be so is to lean on the arm of the flesh. The interest aroused by such an emphasis is generally fleshly and not spiritual. Secondly - and this is something too little appreciated or understood today - this new convert was to be withdrawn from the sphere of service into the quiet obscurity of Arabia (Gal. 1:17) to wait upon God and to learn of Him. New-born babes in Christ need time to grow up and become established in the Faith. For them to thrust themselves or be thrust by others into the maelstrom of spiritual battle is to do what Jesus was not prepared to allow so far as Paul was concerned. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear!

227) 22:1-21

Before passing from these verses, it may be profitable for us to reflect that Paul's insistence on the fact that he was the true representative of the Jewish religion rather than his critics has something to say to us today, since something very akin to this situation may be seen in the life of the Church at the present time. We have lived in a time of spiritual confusion and uncertainty, when the true message of the gospel has been so often at a discount. And, when that gospel has at last been recovered and proclaimed as, thank God, it is, increasingly, this is precisely the complaint that is levelled against it - that the new insistence on the necessity of spiritual rebirth and conversion is violating the tradition of the Kirk. 'What was good enough for our forefathers', people say, 'is good enough for us'. But it depends what is meant by 'what was good enough for our forefathers'. Our forefathers of the late nineteenth century, with its emergent liberalism and modernism, or our forefathers of the eighteenth, seventeenth or sixteenth centuries, when the evangelical, reformed faith proclaimed justification by grace through faith alone, the glorious doctrine of regeneration by the Word and Spirit of God, and evangelical repentance and conversion? It is a question, is it not, of determining what it was our forefathers did believe? And here, the facts are on the side of the gospel that is being recovered in our time. If this then be so, it poses a real issue, for if the doctrine of the necessity of rebirth and conversion is right, then people who cavil at it are in the wrong. Will they submit to the truth as it is now proclaimed, and receive it gladly? Or will they resist it savagely and with great vehemence and bitterness, as Saul of Tarsus once did? That is the burning question for many in our Churches today.

228) 22:22-30

At the mention of the Gentiles the anger and fury of the Jews again broke out. It is impressive to realise that they were prepared to listen to Paul up to that point, and even assent to the reality of his experience; but as soon as he touched upon the one thing that made the gospel a gospel, and a message of hope for all the world, they rebelled against it. They could not accept a message that so obviously called in question their whole position. That is the point at which the bitterest and most entrenched opposition to the gospel always comes. Men find it intolerable to admit that they are in the wrong.

Paul did not hesitate to make use of his Roman citizenship in the crisis that followed nor, it seems, did he expect Divine intervention on his behalf in a situation in which he already had ordinary means at his disposal. The Divine provision was already there, in the providence that had arranged his birth as a Roman citizen. We should not underestimate the significance of our natural advantages in relation to the work of the gospel, nor should we be slow to make use of them when occasion demands. He who has called us to serve Him knows the end from the beginning, and has beforehand endowed us and equipped us against many contingencies. We are not sent to this warfare on our own charges. We shall continue thinking about this the next note.

229) 22:22-30

Paul's attitude here displays his realism. If ever a man was yielded to God and utterly willing for His will, and willing to be led only by Him, Paul was that man. It would be true to say of him that he trusted in the Lord with all his heart and leaned not unto his own understanding. But there are some who think that when you are really in this position spiritually, you leave everything to the Lord in the sense that you would disdain to make use of any ordinary and merely human means in any particular situation of need. This, however, is a temper of spirit which one does not see in the New Testament itself, and certainly was not Paul's attitude here. It is not that he did not, or could not, trust God without doing a little himself just to make sure; rather, he showed his trust in God by making use of something God had by His providence made available as the means of his preservation and protection, and that in two ways: the powers that be are ordained of God, and therefore the provisions of these powers that be are God's provisions for men. Furthermore, as was pointed out in yesterday's Note, it would be strange if God, Who had ordained him before the foundation of the world to be an apostle living in dangerous times, had not made prior provision for his possible needs. It was no accident that Paul was born a Roman citizen, and it was not only permitted to him to make use of this fact as God's provision for his need, it was necessary for him to do so, and - later - to appeal to Caesar. For this was the way God was going to get him to Rome to bear testimony to the gospel there. We must therefore beware of disdaining natural and human rights and privileges, and thus being 'more spiritual' than God Himself. Paul was very much a down-to-earth thinker: this is of course the meaning of the Incarnation, for Christ came down to earth, leaving us an example that we should follow in His steps. It was a measure of his Christian realism that he made use of his Roman citizenship in the service of the gospel.

230) 23:1-5

Paul's spirited protest against the high priest's treatment of him is characteristic, and what we would have expected of this intrepid warrior of the faith. There are, however, two ways of interpreting it. There are those who think that what we have here is an outburst of Paul's fiery, impetuous nature, and that it was, as such, regrettable. Reference is sometimes made to the contrast between Paul's reaction and that of Jesus, Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again, and of Whom it was said that 'as a sheep before its shearers is dumb, so opened He not His mouth'. But it is at least open to question whether the parallel really holds here. For the reason why Jesus was silent was that He was assuming the sins of the world upon Himself and taking guilty man's place, and the only proper attitude of the guilty is to be silent - 'every mouth stopped'. The other interpretation is to see in this outburst Paul's righteous indignation against such a flagrant violation of the law by which he was supposed to be judged. His apology which followed was not an apology for his righteous indignation, but for his ignorance of the fact that the man was the high priest. Paul still had reverence for the office, although he had none for its holder. It may have some bearing on interpretation that Paul's words proved to be a prophecy, for Ananias was assassinated some years later by nationalist insurgents in 66 AD. At all events, Paul's evident respect for the high priest's office shows an attitude that has much to commend it in an age when respect for basic sanctities is at such a discount.

231) 23:6-10

These verses give an instance of the opportunism of the Apostle. Our Lord, in giving instructions to His disciples, once said, 'Behold I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves; be ye therefore wise as serpents and harmless as doves'; and also, 'When they deliver you up, take no thought what ye shall speak, for it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak. For it is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you'. Here is an example of the fulfilment of these words: Paul was as wise as a serpent, and he was given the right thing to say. He spoke one word and that one word split the assembly and broke up the hearing. As we would say, he set the cat among the pigeons with a vengeance! We are told that he saw that the one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees. Did he remember our Lord's word, 'a house divided against itself cannot stand'? If the whole situation were not so serious and critical, one would be tempted to say there was a roguish twinkle in Paul's eyes as he spoke these words. But we do well to remember that this is spiritual warfare and that a shrewd thrust was being made here against the enemy, to confound him and bring him to nought. This disruption of the forces opposed to the gospel embodies, in microcosm, a principle that is always ultimately true of evil - it contains within itself the seeds of ultimate disintegration. The unity of the enemy's camp is always a very temporary thing, and it generally deteriorates into radical differences. For this reason: everyone in that camp wants to be 'top dog'. This is why hell will be so unbearable - everyone will be at everyone else's throat. And in this kind of dissension we see one of the ways in which 'He that is in the heavens shall laugh' and hold His enemies in derision.

232) 23:6-10

Notice what Paul actually said in 6. First of all, he said, 'I am a Pharisee'. We must interpret this in the same way as we interpreted the words, 'I am a Jew' in 22:3. Paul was the truest Pharisee of them all, fulfilling the true idea of Pharisaism, which was to live near to God. It was as if he had said, 'I am one with you in all that is truest in your creed. I invite you to listen, and see whether what I now proclaim to you is not the crown and completion of all your hopes and aspirations. Is not the resurrection of Jesus the one thing needed as proof of that hope of the resurrection of the dead of which you and your fathers have been witnesses?' In the second place, he claimed to have been called in question of the hope and resurrection of the dead. Was this, however, a charge they laid against him? By implication, yes. For his testimony was that he had met a risen Christ, and this implies as a matter of course the resurrection of those who believe in Him. The gospel was in fact the fulfilment of the Pharisaic hope of the resurrection, and it was the resurrection that was at the heart of the issue between Paul and his enemies. But now, another point arises. The opposition of the Sadducees is something that is understandable, for they were the rationalists of the day; but why should the Pharisees, who did not believe in resurrection, oppose him so bitterly also? Ah, yes, intellectual belief in the resurrection is one thing, but living experience of it is another. It is here that the Pharisees and Paul were poles apart. They refused the evidence before their eyes of men alive from the dead. And the best, and ultimately the only conclusive proof of the resurrection, is the existence of resurrected men and women. The one unanswerable argument is LIFE!

233) 23:11-22

The Lord's assurance to Paul in 11 seems to have come at a time when he was beset with doubts and discouragement. It is surely understandable that he should feel so. One of the most desolating of all Christian experiences is to step out, as Paul had just done in going up to Jerusalem, in the faith and conviction that it is God's will, and then to encounter all manner of opposition and difficulty, as if circumstances were bent on convincing us that we are wrong. It was probably one of the darkest hours of his life. Then the word of the Lord came to him, and that word seems to have conditioned all else that followed. Always, after this, we see him calm, detached, and sure of himself, dauntless, fearless, victorious. Not, be it noted, that he was now assured of safety, so much as of the fulfilment of God's purposes. That to him was the important thing. This is reflected in what he says in the Philippian letter, written some little time later from his prison in Rome, 'I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel'. It is a great thing when a man has a sense of destiny, for thereby he rides the storms of life with confidence and without fear. This is very important in relation to what follows in the story, the plot to assassinate him. One is reminded of the words spoken by our Lord, 'Mine hour is not yet come'. Because this was so, no man could touch Him. And it underlies the glorious, confidence-giving truth that a man is immortal until his work is done.

234) 23:11-22

Two further points should be noted in this passage. Firstly, it is startling to see the extent to which religious bigotry can go. What an intense hatred is evidenced in the diabolical vow these desperate men took upon themselves! The message of the gospel when resisted brings out the worst in men, and exposes the black depths of the natural heart. It is not difficult to believe in the demonic when we read such words as these! We recall how it is said that the devil entered into Judas Iscariot, leading him to betray Christ, and we may surely say of these men here also that, having given themselves over to evil counsels, the devil took possession of their souls. Secondly, we see as we have so often seen already how easily and effortlessly their wicked designs were foiled by the hand of the Lord. God chose an unknown young man as His instrument, and pitted him against the might of evil that gripped the hearts of these wicked men. By the weak things of the world He confounds the mighty. Call to mind Elijah's strange experience in 1 Kings 19:11, when wind, earthquake and fire gave place to the 'still small voice', which someone has translated as 'the sound of gentle stillness'. So it was here. Not a legion of angels, not a demonstration of power, but a young lad, whose name we do not even know! This is the estimate God placed on the worst they could do against His honoured servant. Thus easily does He set at nought the evil designs of evil men. This is a great encouragement in Christian work, when our spirits feel appalled in face of the magnitude of the opposition often arrayed against us. If God be for us, our insufficiency becomes irrelevant. He will work on our behalf, and none shall hinder.

235) 23:23-35

Two thoughts emerge from this passage. In the first place, we see God's personal care and concern for His honoured servant. Paul was doubtless weary and under considerable physical strain, and God provided for his temporal needs through the action of the chief captain (24). This is only one of many instances that could be cited from the Scriptures to assure us that when we are fulfilling the Divine purpose in our labours God will not be slow to attend to our personal concerns. He is not unrighteous to forget our labour of love, and heaven and earth will pass away before He fails to compensate us in His loving kindness towards us. In the second place, we should not miss the startling similarity, as has already been mentioned in a previous note, between Paul's experience at this time and our Lord's. Think back over the events - the riot, the scourging, the council, the hatred, the insults, the plot, the false witnesses. The very words of the chief captain in his letter to Felix in 29 are reminiscent of Pilate's when he said of Jesus, 'I find no fault in this Man'. Nor should we be surprised at this. Paul elsewhere (Col 1:24) speaks of filling up that which was behind of the afflictions of Christ, and what we see in Paul's experience is the 'reflection', so to speak, of the agony of Christ on the cross. Not for nothing did he say, 'I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus'. And all who will serve Him with sacrificial faithfulness must surely bear a similar imprint on their lives.

236) 24:1-9

When the plot against Paul's life was discovered, the chief captain sent him under heavy escort to Caesarea with a covering letter to Felix the governor, who decided to hear the case when Paul's accusers came down from Jerusalem. Which they did, in five days' time, accompanied by a professional pleader, Tertullus. The Jews' aim was of course so to incriminate Paul and show him wrongfully taken from their jurisdiction by the chief captain that he might be handed back by Felix to them to be tried by the Jewish Sanhedrin. If this had happened, it would have been the end of Paul. But again the overruling providence of God was with him, and he was kept safe from their evil designs, and was in fact safer in prison in Caesarea than he would have been anywhere else!

The wildness of the accusations against Paul should be noted. It is an evidence of how completely truth becomes distorted when hate takes over, and men are willing to believe the worst. Doubtless by this time they were filled with righteous indignation, and really thought Paul a pestilential fellow. But one has only to compare Tertullus's account in these verses with what is recorded in the previous chapter, to see how grossly it had become distorted. When we want to believe ill of a man, we will soon begin to believe the worst to be true, and believe that the worst has happened.

237) 24:1-9

We wonder whether Tertullus realised how utterly false and unconvincing his speech must have sounded, certainly to Paul, and in all probability to Felix also. It is an evidence of hypocrisy of the worst type. Felix had proved an extremely unpopular and even hated governor. It has been said of him that, 'in the practice of all kinds of lust and cruelty he exercised the power of a king with the temper of a slave'. Yet the Jews were prepared to flatter him in this outrageous, nauseating way to gain their point. This is always a despicable expedient, and generally argues a complete lack of integrity of character. No man worth his salt would stoop so low. But not only so. Felix must have been aware of the manifest insincerity of it all. We think that if wordy flatterers only knew how quickly those with even a modicum of discernment were able to see through their specious blandishments they would think twice before they spoke. To a man of honour there is nothing in the world so obnoxious as the fulsome insincerity of flattering words. Nor do men of dishonour differ in this matter. The hardened and unscrupulous men of the world, like Felix, are usually clear-sighted enough to penetrate and expose the arts of cringing sycophants like Tertullus - they have to be, to maintain their position. Only when they are weak enough, and vain enough, to want and to enjoy flattery is there any hope of deceiving them.

238) 24:10-21

Paul's speech was so different from that of his accuser! We see how tawdry a thing human eloquence is when placed side by side with the quiet, authoritative utterance of a man filled with the Holy Ghost. It is not that there was a difference merely in degree which made Paul's statement more effective than the other - we are in two different worlds with the two men. Truth that comes from a clean heart and a clear conscience has a power and a force that not the greatest oratory can ever hope to rival, for it carries the seal of God upon it. That is what gives it its unique authority. As Peter points out, 'Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost' (2 Pet 1:21).

The lesson this teaches is one that might well be applied as a gauge of the worth of true preaching. We have been brought up in an age when the true function and significance of preaching has been obscured, and consequently far more attention has been paid to the possession of the gifts of oratory and eloquence than to the need for a holy unction from on high that makes preaching really live. Eloquence may stir and stimulate men's minds and imaginations, but nothing but the unction of the Holy Spirit will effect a moral transformation in men's hearts. What should be coveted and sought after is not the ability to turn a phrase elegantly or to effect a nicely-studied climax, but the power to convey living and life-giving truth to the souls of men. Not that this latter will mean the neglect of the niceties of language; the very opposite is the case, and even unlearned and ignorant men, when sealed with the unction of the Spirit, speak with a simple dignity and beauty of language which may often put the learned to shame. But this will always be incidental, never essential, to their main purpose. It would have been well for the Church to have remembered this far more than has been the case. Wisdom of words has ever been a doubtful asset in the work of the gospel.

239) 24:10-21

The charge made against Paul was a threefold one - sedition (5a), sacrilege (6), and heresy (5b). In his defence he repudiates the first two by a simple appeal to the facts. In the first place it was only twelve days since he had reached Jerusalem, five of which he had spent in prison. Could he have had opportunity, as they averred, to stir up sedition in so short a time? In the second place, his supposed desecration of the temple was the opposite of the truth, for he had in fact worshipped in all reverence (cf 17, 18). The facts were indisputable, and could be proved, as they, and Felix, knew. But the third charge he admits and confesses (14). 'If it be heresy to believe the gospel', he says, 'then I am an heretic'. This has been Paul's insistence all along. He has already claimed to be a Jew, a Pharisee. And he has maintained that it is possible to be a true Jew or Pharisee only by being a Christian - i.e., the Christian Faith is the fulfilment of the old dispensation of Judaism. And he had found it necessary to come out from the prevalent worship of his time in order to worship truly - because the worship of his time was untrue to its basis and its heritage in the Scriptures. The Jews were repudiating Paul's doctrine of grace, preferring to hold, as they felt, to the old teaching of Moses. But Paul's point is that they had misunderstood Moses, the law and the prophets. If they had really and truly believed and heard Moses they would have believed in Christ. If it was heresy so to believe in Christ and to worship God through Him, then Paul was glad to be called a heretic.

240) 24:10-21

Paul's continued insistence on his orthodoxy as a Jew is evidenced very clearly in 14, and his words are significant. Christianity, he claims, is a way of worshipping God. We should not miss the force of these words, for they make an exclusive claim. Not only are other ways outside the Christian faith, such as, for example, Buddhism and Mohammedanism, called in question, but also all other ways within so-called Christendom that do not exclusively emphasise the apostolic message of atonement through the work of Christ and repentance and personal faith in Him. This is something that needs to be remembered. The apostolic 'way' is the way of conversion and rebirth, and to this the law and the prophets bear witness, The whole weight of scriptural authority is against those who deny the necessity of being born again of the Spirit, and to do so is to preach 'another gospel' which is no gospel at all.

We note in 15 that Paul speaks of a general resurrection both of the just and the unjust. There has sometimes been confusion in people's minds about this, especially with reference to Rev 20:4, 5, where separate resurrections of the just and unjust seem to be indicated. But our Lord's own words in John 5:28, 29 substantiate Paul here. We should bear in mind, as a general rule of interpretation, that it is best to take plain and unequivocal statements as the basis of doctrinal positions and seek to interpret allegorical or symbolic statements (as we have in Rev 20) in the light of them, and not vice versa. Jesus' and Paul's statements do not admit of alternative interpretations, while that in Revelation does, as some commentators are not slow to point out (it is the souls of those that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus that are spoken of in Rev 20:4, 5, whereas Jesus and Paul are surely referring to the resurrection of the body, and this should be sufficient to indicate the interpretation that should be adduced). There is therefore no need to assume any contradiction.

241) 24:20-21

We must look at Paul's words in 16 before leaving this passage - Paul's concern to have always a conscience void of offence toward God and toward men. The context of this reference is highly important, for it is against the backcloth of the certainty of a day of judgment and of the resurrection of the just and the unjust that he thinks it so urgently necessary to live in this way. A word about conscience in general therefore will not be out of place here. The word, meaning literally 'fellow knowledge with oneself', refers to the mysterious 'faculty' within that acts as monitor, assessor and judge of all our actions and thoughts, bearing witness to the extent of our conformity to the law of God. It is this John refers to as the 'light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world'. Of this statement Calvin says, 'We know that men have this peculiar excellence above other animals, that they are endued with reason and intelligence, and that they carry the distinction between right and wrong engraven on their conscience. There is no man, therefore, whom some perception of the eternal light does not reach'. Conscience, then, is God's monitor in the soul, His representative within man, the principle imprinted in the heart made in His image which seeks to impose constant obedience to divine law. It possesses in itself no power as an aid to obedience, but leaves a man without excuse for not being aware of the nature of his acts, and thus increases his responsibility for them. We shall continue this discussion in the next note.

242) 24:10-21

It does not follow from what was said yesterday, however, that to live by conscience is all that God requires of man or even that man could require of himself. The complicating factor here is the doctrine of the Fall of man. Man was made in the image of God, with this built-in monitor that we call conscience, but when man fell, every part of his being was affected by the tragedy: will, intelligence, reason, emotions, memory, and conscience. And for this reason conscience is unable to do its divinely-appointed work as before. True, it will function, but it no longer functions properly as it would have done, and as it was meant to do, if the Fall had not taken place. Before the Fall, it was an infallible echo of the will of God, but now it is fitful and fallible, and no longer dependable. This is why it is so dangerous for the natural man to be content with saying, 'I live by the dictates of my conscience', as if this were an infallible and sufficient guide for life and sufficient to please God. It was John Knox who once told Mary, Queen of Scots, that conscience was of little value unless it were properly instructed. And this happens only when the grace of God leads a man's conscience into captivity to the will of God. Then, it begins to function properly, and 'living by the dictates of conscience' becomes meaningful, because conscience now bears witness to both tables of the law, the Godward as well as the manward, and the believer holds faith and a good conscience, and lives void of offence toward God and man alike. This was Paul's testimony before his accusers and Felix.

243) 24:22-27

Paul's encounter with Felix reads with tremendous dramatic power. The governor seems to have shown considerable concern for Paul's welfare (23), and this meant in fact that the apostle was safer in captivity than he would have been at liberty. Whether this means that with his 'more perfect knowledge of that way' (22) he felt drawn to the gospel and felt sympathy with Paul, we cannot say. But it is clear that he was very deeply disturbed when he was confronted by the stern challenge of 25. Paul's reasoning made him tremble. This is a significant point. It is often objected that the evangelistic approach is to the emotions, and that to play upon the impulse of fear is reprehensible. But Paul's appeal was to the conscience through the mind. He reasoned with Felix of righteousness, temperance and judgment to come, and it was conviction of conscience, not a stirring of emotion, that made him tremble. For Paul was not exercising himself in intellectual discussion or indulging in a comfortable disquisition but issuing a moral challenge, a disturbing, forthright summons to repentance. In this connection we need to remember that the good news of the gospel begins with bad news about sin. There is no point in hiding the real issues that are involved. Righteousness, temperance, judgment to come - these speak of the inexorable claims of God upon men, and peace, joy, grace all come on the other side of our yielding to Christ.

244) 24:22-27

The precise interpretation to be placed on Paul's preaching of 'righteousness, temperance and judgment to come' is ascertainable when we recall that, not so long previously to this time, the apostle had written, while at Corinth, a reasoned statement of the gospel to the saints at Rome. It is hardly possible, therefore, that when he reasoned thus with Felix, he could have done so otherwise than along the lines of the argument set out in that wonderful epistle. This being so, it is hardly to be wondered at that the governor trembled. For Romans speaks of righteousness lacking in man, bringing him into condemnation and necessitating the imputation of the righteousness of God to the sinner through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus; it speaks of imparted righteousness, leading to temperance or self-control, in the sense that the gospel imparts and implants a new principle within a man to regulate and control the lawless passions and instincts that have got the mastery over the natural man, and put them in their proper place. Above all it speaks of judgment to come in that it urgently reminds men that it will not be all the same in the end whether they receive the gospel or not. It is either: be saved with a real salvation that will transform the whole of life, or: be lost, in a loss which is irremediable and eternal. My gospel, says Paul, is a gospel with the character of finality about it; it is God's last word to man, and the consequences of accepting or rejecting it are final too. Obey, and you enter into light in which there is no darkness at all; disobey, and you pass eventually into a darkness in which there is no light at all. No wonder Felix trembled!

245) 24:22-27

It is one thing, however, to be interested in, even sympathetic to, the gospel; one thing to tremble under conviction of sin, but quite another to commit oneself unequivocally to Jesus Christ. Paul was fearless in his challenge to Felix - remember, John the Baptist lost his head for a similar stand before Herod - assuredly recognising that this was a time of opportunity, of destiny, for the governor. But, ultimately, the issue lay with Felix himself, and he hedged and procrastinated, dismissing Paul with the promise that he would hear him another time.

A conflict of interests beset him; the word of God to his soul was urgent and compelling, but the claims of the seen and temporal proved too strong for him and, convicted of sin as he was, he let slip the opportunity of salvation, for all we know, forever. We cannot doubt that he was near to the kingdom of God that day, but as Bunyan points out in the Pilgrim's Progress, there is a road to hell from the gates of heaven, and it would seem that, by constant vacillation leading to the hardening of his heart, Felix took that way and was lost. And what, asks Jesus, shall it profit a man if he should gain the whole world (26) and lose his own soul?

246) 25:1-12

For two long years Paul lay in prison in Caesarea. This need not, however, necessarily be construed as unrelieved disaster for him. It is not difficult to see purpose in it. For one thing it was time given to Felix to make up his mind about the gospel (one marvels at the patience of God with men!). That he should have failed to do so makes him finally inexcusable in the sight of God. But more. In the providence of God these two years were a means of grace to Paul, a timely respite from the exhausting journeyings in which he had spent himself so utterly for many years. The conditions of his imprisonment seem to have been remarkably lenient for prisons in these days (24:23), and afforded him a much-needed opportunity to regain strength for all that lay ahead of him in the future. This may seem a gratuitous and hopelessly idealistic way of looking at black misfortunes, but it is the way Paul himself looked at them and by example invites us to do so. There is little doubt that he would cheerfully have said of this imprisonment as he did of a later one, 'I have learned....to be content' (Phil 4:11), and, 'I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel' (Phil 1:12). Happy is the man who is able to see in the providence of God the triumph of His grace!

247) 25:1-12

Festus is an interesting study. He was known in ancient history as one of the better Roman governors, and there are some evidences in this passage that he desired to give Paul a fair trial (4, 5). He was unwilling to be swayed by the Jews (4) and this may be an indication that he saw through their craftiness. Roman governors were not as a rule marked by credulity, but rather by astuteness, and not likely to be taken in by the kind of subterfuge indicated here. We can well imagine the contempt with which he viewed their ugly passions and sinister designs on Paul in the name of their religion. And yet we find him accommodating their wickedness to curry favour with them (9), and this raises the question whether in the judgment of history he is any better than Felix or Pilate who allowed motives of possible personal gain to influence them in the critical decisions they were called on to make. The pull of favour in public life has always been dangerous strong, and it requires a man of unquestioned integrity and inflexible principle to resist it. It is said of some in positions of high responsibility and authority that they cannot be bought at any price. There were, it seems, few in the ancient world of this calibre. If there are more in our day - and we trust it may be so! - it can only be because the impact of the unconditioned ethic of the Christian gospel on society has produced them.

248) 25:1-12

To have agreed to Festus' suggestion would have been to sign a death warrant for himself, and Paul had no intention of doing so. In a spirited and forthright protest he appealed to Caesar - the prerogative of every Roman citizen when his rights were threatened - and Festus had no option but to comply with his request. Sometimes Christians are concerned about Paul's attitude in this matter. The example of Christ is cited, 'like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth' (Acts 8:32), and it is asked, 'Why, if Christ meekly submitted Himself, did Paul assert his rights as he did?' One can only reply that the cases are not the same. Christ remained silent because His sufferings were redemptive and atoning, as Paul's were not. It behoved Christ to suffer, and it was His will and choice to do so; indeed, the initiative was His throughout the whole drama, in a way that certainly was not true in Paul's case. Paul took the initiative for the will of God in making his protest to Festus. It was just as necessary for Paul to speak at this point as it was for Jesus to remain silent before His accusers, and the interests of the kingdom were equally served in both instances. It is all a question of knowing when to speak and when not to speak. And the great over-ruling consideration is what the will of God happens to be for a particular occasion. God had already indicated that Paul should bear witness at Rome also, and remaining silent at this juncture would certainly have meant that Paul would never have reached the capital. Unquestionably he was right therefore in employing all legitimate means at his disposal to ensure he got there.

249) 25:13-22

Festus' report to King Agrippa is an indirect testimony to the clear and plain message that Paul preached. It is obvious that the governor had little time for it, but at least he knew what Paul was asserting - it could not be mistaken, so decisive and categorical it was - 'one Jesus, which was dead, whom Paul affirmed to be alive' (19). There is a great deal of instruction for us in this. Sometimes it is claimed that a man preaches 'over the head of his people'; they cannot understand what he is saying, and when he has finished they are more puzzled and perplexed than ever; and sometimes it is complained that preachers are not on the proper wave length for contemporary society. But here is a man, pagan in origin and background, with little time for spiritual realities, who gathered immediately what Paul was saying and claiming, so unambiguous was the Apostle's preaching. This should teach us the necessity of preaching the message of grace scripturally with great plainness of speech. It may well be that the problem of communication that faces the Church today is not so much that of presenting the gospel in everyday speech and everyday thought as of its confused ways and of its tendency to clothe clear and plain ideas in such uncertain and even apologetic language suitably watered down so as not to offend anyone's susceptibilities that the essential message becomes partially, if not completely, obscured. Paul called a spade a spade; he spoke of sin and salvation, conversion and spiritual rebirth, heaven and hell, in unmistakable terms. On these basic issues he was not prepared to be misunderstood.

250) 25:23-27

We should not miss the significance of these brief verses. Agrippa the king, and Bernice, Festus the governor, the chief captains and principal men of the city -all these gathered together, with the ceremonial and pomp of a great occasion, to listen to Paul. What an audience for the gospel! We see here what a glorious reality the sovereignty of God is. Paul was a prisoner, in chains, but never was there such a royal captive, or so free! He was, under God, on the offensive for the gospel. We often mourn about the decline of the Church's influence in the land - how few will listen to our word! But here is a man who even in prison is able to gather, not only a congregation, but a company of the most influential people in the country to hear his message. There is something so grand and majestic about this that we want to shout Bravo! And the thought that comes to our minds is that if there was a gospel in Scotland like Paul's and a consecrated endeavour like his - as has indeed been known in our past history - we might see such things happen again. God will not be slow to use men who put themselves as utterly in His hands as Paul did, and He will delight in manifesting His sovereign power in blessing their testimony.

251) 26:1-8

This chapter contains the third record of Paul's conversion that we have in Acts (cf 9:1 ff and 22:1 ff). He begins here with the same emphasis as in 22:1 ff on his orthodoxy as a Jew, and the insistence that in having become a Christian he was not following some strange new idea but fulfilling the real meaning of both the Old Testament Scriptures and the Jewish faith. In relation to this, the thrust of the opening verses is very pointed. The Pharisees believed in resurrection as a doctrine, yet when Paul applied the doctrine to a particular case, namely to Jesus (as Festus said, he affirmed that Jesus was alive), they objected to his claim and refused his word. And he says, 'Why should this claim be adjudged incredible, if in fact God does raise the dead, as you believe? Moreover, my claim that God has raised Jesus from the dead is not incredible. I know He is risen. I met Him on the Damascus Road.' Such is the argument here, and we are prompted to remark that the Pharisees' reaction to it has its modern counterpart today in the embarrassment and ridicule, not to speak of opposition, shown when a living testimony is borne to the saving grace of Christ. People pay lip-service to the idea of a living God, but it is clear that many of them have never known Him and are incredulous of the very possibility that He could really break into a man's life in transforming power - so much so that it is regarded almost as bad etiquette, even indecorous, for a man to speak in personal terms of what Christ has done for him. So completely can religion and religious traditions be divorced from the reality of the gospel!

252) 26:9-11

In these verses Paul is saying, in effect, 'I appreciate your point of view, of course, in your considering this claim incredible, for I myself used to think as you do. Pharisee though I was, and thus in theory a believer in the resurrection of the dead I yet judged it incredible in the case of Jesus, and thought it my duty to oppose such a heresy. But I want to tell you now how wrong I was proved to be.' Such is Paul's line of argument here. What he says in these verses by way of introduction to it is very significant. Until a man does meet the living Christ, he conceives it as his duty to deny or explain away the experience that true believers claim. He is 'contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth'. And when he begins to be a little afraid that what they claim might conceivably be true, the reaction becomes marked and intense. There is little doubt that this is what lay behind Paul's vehement rage and bitter persecution of the Church. His conscience was goaded almost beyond endurance. And we underline these verses because of those whose reactions against and criticisms of the work of conversion that biblical preaching inevitably stresses have been very revealing. Men give away far more than they realise when they object to the plain teaching of the Scriptures, for be they never so earnest or religious, they thereby expose the basic unbelief of their hearts. To encounter opposition in Christian work should therefore encourage rather than discourage us. If men are kicking against the pricks, we may hope that in the end they will capitulate their proud wills and bow the knee to the Son of God and own Him Lord of their lives.

253) 26:12-18

Two things in particular stand out in these verses. The words of our Lord in 16 are not recorded elsewhere in the accounts of Paul's conversion. It was a royal command that the living Christ gave when He said, 'Rise, stand upon thy feet', and we may think, by way of illustration, of the procedure adopted by our own sovereign when conferring the accolade of knighthood. The recipient kneels down a commoner, and rises a knight of the realm. And pardon, and the gift of life, is as instant as that! One moment under condemnation, a rebel, and the chief of sinners because he persecuted the Church of God, the next justified and renewed. Such is the miracle of redeeming grace. In the second place, our Lord gives an authoritative pronouncement as to the nature of the work He has given His Church to do - opening blind eyes, turning men from darkness to light and from the power of Satan unto God, bringing them a knowledge of forgiveness. This is the commission given to the servants of the gospel, and we ought to test the validity of our work by this standard. Are we opening blind eyes? Are souls being brought from darkness to light? Are they beginning to 'see' the kingdom of God? Are men being delivered from the power of Satan? Do we recognise this last to be the deepest work of all? These are questions that ought to be asked continually. We can never be too careful in the work of the Lord. It is fatally easy to be swayed by less urgent considerations. Satan will see to that!

254) 26:19-26

Paul's response to the claims of Christ was wholehearted. It is described in 19 as obedience to the heavenly vision. This is the characteristic note in his experience. Paul had as much of the mystical as any man, but his faith had the moral quality of obedience at its heart and core. 'What wilt Thou have me to do?' he asked on the Damascus Road and from that point his life was characterised by an unquestioning obedience to the will of God. We note, but are not surprised at this, that Festus thought he was beside himself. Unquestioning obedience of this sort has often been regarded as madness and fanaticism by the opponents of the gospel, and it is part of the reproach of Christ that believers will have to suffer - not, sadly enough, from the outright unbeliever only, but also from the lukewarm, compromising Church that has lost its vision and its faith. Again, significantly, in 21-23, Paul stresses that his gospel fulfils the meaning and message of the Old Testament prophets. He was confident he was on unassailable ground in this. The logic of his argument from the Scriptures was unanswerable, and the Jews could repudiate it only at the expense of truth and honesty. This, alas, they so often did, and rendered themselves without excuse before God.

255) 26:27-32

Paul's outright challenge to Agrippa makes thrilling reading. One can image his flashing eyes and ringing voice. Agrippa was dressed in his royal finery, but he was confronted that day by a figure more royal by far than he, the Lord's freeman, and the royal ambassador of the King of kings! There are varying interpretations of Agrippa's famous words, 'Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian', and many think that the true rendering should be one expressing mockery and derision rather than that Agrippa was on the point of becoming a Christian. The Greek itself is ambiguous, it is true, and could be given the following meanings: 'In a little thou persuadest me to be a Christian?' 'With as little persuasion as this thou wouldest fain make me a Christian?'; 'In a little thou art persuading me to act the Christian?'; 'In a little time thou thinkest to make a Christian of me?' The Scholars maintain that the phrase 'in a little' cannot be made to mean 'almost' as in the AV. But Chrysostom, and some of the Reformers, including Luther, took it to mean just that. The case is not decisive against the AV rendering, but even if another rendering must be adopted, expressing scorn and irony - 'it will take more than that to make a Christian of me, Paul' - can we be so sure that the mockery did not hide a deeply troubled conscience? It is quite conceivable that Agrippa's complacency was shaken far more than he was prepared to show by the impassioned words of the Apostle. After all, what does it take, more than what Paul had that day given, to make a man a Christian? If ever the Holy Spirit was present in a man's testimony, He surely was in Paul's words that day. And if the Apostle's words had made Felix tremble, is it inconceivable that he should have had a similar effect on Agrippa? At all events, Paul followed his reply with a wholehearted prayer that he might be not only almost but altogether persuaded by the truth of the gospel. For to be almost persuaded is to remain uncommitted and to be lost. The old saying about hell being paved with good intentions becomes terribly true in this connection.

256) 26:27-32

Before we pass from this stirring chapter it will be useful to take note of the various reactions of the Roman officials, Felix, Festus and Agrippa, to the gospel. Felix trembled; Agrippa was almost persuaded; Festus thought Paul mad. They provide us with a fascinating study of the differing action of the seed of the Word in the hearts of men. Of the three, Festus was, it seems, utterly blind and insensitive to the reality of spiritual things. At no point at all in the proceedings was there a glimmer of light in his darkened mind and heart. We need not be surprised if our testimony does not prevail with some, when this was the mighty Apostle's experience. Ultimately, Felix and Agrippa were in no better case, but at least they were moved and stirred. What is the explanation of the difference in their attitudes? In the last resort this must remain a mystery, and yet there may be something in the thought that both Felix and Agrippa had a considerable knowledge of the law of God, Felix through Bernice, and Agrippa by his background, while Festus has none. Paul teaches in Romans that 'by the law is the knowledge of sin', and in Galatians that 'the law is our schoolmaster to lead us to Christ'. If this be a valid inference, it teaches us something important about the correct approach to evangelism, something we see evidenced in the preaching of John the Baptist. Law precedes gospel, and serves to break up the fallow ground of men's hearts, preparing them for the reception of the Word that saves. Is there a lesson here for us? Have we forgotten the function of the law in our presentation of the gospel? We are afraid of this, of course. But our fear is due to the fact that we confuse law with legalism. But the law is not legalism, it is the expression of the divine will and character, and how needful it is to proclaim it today. Is it not part of the Church's prophetic ministry to declare God's word as an ultimatum to men and nations?

257) 27:1-13

We come now to the beginning of the journey that was to bring Paul to Rome. The record given us in this and the next chapter has everything so far as drama and thrill are concerned. But there are hidden significances and deep spiritual lessons here that are even more important. Not least of these is the awareness that very soon grips us as we read that this was no ordinary storm; the ominous phrases in 4, 7, 8, 9 used to describe the deterioration in the weather have spiritual undertones which make it easy to see in this an illustration of the onset of Satanic pressures on the soul. But not only so: the storm is not only an illustration of satanic pressures: it was a satanic pressure and attack on Paul. The captain of the ship and his crew were not to know that a great drama of spiritual destiny was being enacted, and that their ship was a battleground where the powers of darkness and light were locked in mortal conflict, but this is the truth of the matter. We should think back a few chapters, to the constraint that Paul felt in his spirit to go to Jerusalem, and thence to Rome. Events proved Paul to be right, and this constraint was shown to be of God. The assurance given Paul in the vision (23:11) makes it clear that God wanted Paul in Rome. That being so, there was clearly a strategic purpose involved, and consequently something of critical concern to Satan. At all costs he must frustrate the divine purpose - not that he necessarily knew what it was, but at least he must know it was something disastrous for the kingdom of darkness.

And, because Paul was a force to be reckoned with by the dark underworld of spirits, it was not surprising that he became at this critical point such a target for their fire.

258) 27:1-13

But we must not get this out of perspective, for all that, and what Satan does is not the most important or most decisive factor in such a situation. The storm was engineered by him, it is true, but we can also say quite categorically that God allowed him to stir up that storm (cf Job 1/2). This means that it was, in an even deeper sense, fulfilling the divine will in doing something in Paul and through Paul, for His purpose and glory. Doing what, then? Well, recall that other storm in Mark 4:35-41 - also one of unusual violence. It was Christ Himself that sent the disciples into it. For what reason? To teach them something - this, it would seem, is the significance of the words, 'Why are ye so fearful? How is it that ye have no faith?' Did He want them to stand firm in the storm, and weather it without a miraculous stilling of it? If they had, they would have been proved to be men who could stand firm in storms, and their testimony would have been the stronger and greater. And so here: it is that God might accomplish something in Paul that He allows Satan to stir this storm, as if to say, 'Do your worst, Satan, and see how My man stands the test, compared with yours.' And how wonderfully he did stand! And - and this is the important thing - by this, Paul's testimony was the more powerful and effective in that situation. He stood out, and with what impact upon his companions we may well imagine! Well might he say to the Philippians, 'The things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel.' It is the gospel that is furthered when we weather the storms of life.

259) 27:14-26

There is still more to be said, however. There are storms and storms. In the book of Jonah we read of a storm which came upon the prophet because he was out of joint spiritually. Storms are not necessarily a sign of divine displeasure, as is clear from what has already been said; but some are, and when storms come it is always wise to be asking ourselves why they have come. For sometimes they come because we have done wrong or taken a wrong step, or because the general direction of our lives has somehow become set against the good and acceptable and perfect will of the Lord - either by deliberate rebellion, or by an unconscious and imperceptible drifting away from a high position we once were glad to accept, no longer holding as absolute priorities what we once held as priorities in the spiritual life. How, then, to distinguish between the two kinds of storm? Well, at the height of this storm, the Lord appeared to Paul. It is when there is no cheering Voice of the Saviour, no gracious intimations of the Spirit that we ought to be examining ourselves. One soon knows!

260) 27:14-26

But there is still another way of looking at this storm, in the light of what has been said, namely from the point of view of the sailors and the ship's captain. Sometimes storms come when we have determined to go on a particular course in spite of what anyone may say to us. Note what Paul says in 9 - 'I perceive....' He read the signs, but they clearly did not. What signs? The difficulties that beset their way. His sensitive spirit was alive to dangers which the sea-captain for all his experience was not able to discern. It may be that he was supernaturally aware of approaching danger, having had intimations from the Spirit that peril awaited them. Yet some are so insensitive in such a situation, and bulldoze their way through, determined at whatever cost to go on. Ah, there are times when the warning counsel of a Spirit-filled man is to be listened to even in face of the knowledge and experience of men skilled in their calling. Such men are able to see beyond the soft winds and the blue skies to the dark clouds beyond the horizon. In this particular situation it is not natural skills like seamanship but spiritual discernment that avails. Far better to have listened to the Apostle than to have trusted in his own wisdom and understanding. How often do we land ourselves in storms of trouble by acting against wiser judgment and counsel! So many times our more discerning friends could say, 'You should have hearkened unto me'. But some are so 'spiritual' on the other hand, that they are not prepared to take advice from any man. They look to God alone, as they say, forgetting that God can authentically give His guidance through men. This attitude is not 'spiritual'; it is pig-headed. And obstinacy is a sign not of strength but of weakness. We should realise that both the doctrine of providence and that of the membership of the body of Christ authenticates guidance given through believers wiser and older than ourselves. And if this be so, what are we to say of those who act against their own better judgment, let alone that of others?

261) 27:14-26

Paul's affirmation of faith in 25 is magnificent, the more so when we see its context. Humanly speaking, all hope was lost (20), but over against the hopelessness and extremity of the situation Paul cried, 'I believe God.' Against hope, he believed in hope. What a mighty comfort and consolation and strength it is in the midst of storms to cling tenaciously to the bare word of a promising God! Paul's attitude was, 'If God has spoken, it does not matter how dark it gets or how hopeless it becomes.' The storm continued to rage for days after this assurance was given him, but he was at peace. He knew God was faithful and that He was the God of the impossible. This assurance about the faithfulness of God and the trustworthiness of His Word is basic and elemental; it is the one indispensable necessity in the Christian life. To know that God means what He says and will do all He has promised is the sheet anchor of the soul which makes us independent of all human circumstances whatsoever.

The fruits of such a faith are characteristic. To believe God like this imparts an indefinable but unmistakable quality to life. Look at this spiritual giant, in the height of that howling storm. Emergencies reveal sterling worth, or the lack of it. The quality of his faith imparted a stature to him which the tempest seemed to accentuate, while it exposed weakness in others. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to make men of us, and where He has His way it is men of high and redoubtable calibre that He produces. Here is the end-product of the work of sanctification. Is this not an encouragement to us, to think this is what God is intent on making us through the disciplines of the Word?

262) 27:27-36

We continue to think of the fruit of Paul's faith. In the face of all that was contrary to it he maintained an unshakeable trust in God's Word which made him at once the most sensible and practical man on board the ship. This is evidenced in 31, 33, 34. In the midst of the general panic and disorder he is the only one who talks and acts sensibly. How completely in command of the situation he was! It is clear that his presence inspired the ship's company and calmed the crew (36), from which we may gather that holiness, in the fullest biblical sense, is not a 'hot-house' pietistic unworldliness, but a strong, manly wholeness which cannot be mistaken for less. Godliness of life is practical, and it does not unfit a man for the practical duties of life.

Paul was a well-saved man, and well-saved men are good people to have around you in a time of crisis. You can depend on them for real help. What is more, Paul's presence in the ship's company was a blessing and benediction to all who were with him because of what he was. 'God hath given thee all that sail with thee' is what the angel of the Lord had said to him in the vision, and how truly was this fulfilled in the event, for they owed him their very lives. One thinks of a similar emphasis in Gen 39:5, where it is said that Potiphar and his household were blessed for Joseph's sake. This can surely be taken as a general promise for our daily witness, at home and at work, when our lives are what they should be for God - 'all that sail, work, or live with thee will I give thee'. What a challenge and what an incentive!

263) 27:37-44

The final movement of the drama is unfolded in these verses. It is fascinating to discern, amid the fury of the storm, the unerring guidance of the hand of God upon them, steering them safely into the creek where the ship was grounded. We may learn from this that the roaring of the waves and the howling of the winds need not finally dismay God's people, for neither wind nor wave can ever hinder His working. But sometimes they conceal it, and it is then that faith is tested. As the hymn puts it,

He hides Himself so wondrously,
As though there were no God;
He is least seen when all the powers
Of ill are most abroad.

But for those who have eyes to see, the hand of the unseen Worker is everywhere apparent, and it is the glory of faith to see that this is so. In 44 the words 'so' and 'safe' should specially occupy our attention. This was the fulfilment of His assurance to the Apostle, and one can only marvel at the way in which clouds and darkness, storm and tempest were all pressed into the service of His will, in bringing Paul to Rome for the furtherance of the gospel. One might well ask why it should have been such an arduous and hazardous voyage, but that is to fail to realise that the servants of God are committed to such a way of life 'In the world ye shall have tribulation', said Christ to His disciples. But He went on - and this touches all with glory - 'but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world.' No more apt word could be written over this wonderful 'storm-chapter' than that. It is a full and comprehensive commentary on the basic meaning of all that Paul passed through.

264) 28:1-6

Even if Paul could say, as he does in Romans 5:3, 'we glory in tribulations', it is nevertheless not an easy way to live. It lays pressures and strains on life. It costs. And Paul was human, not a super-man above feeling the frailties that mark normal life. And the signs are not wanting that he did feel the burden of that tremendous time. We read later that when he found fellowship on the road to Rome with some believers, he 'thanked God and took courage'. That is a revealing word. But now we have to discuss a twofold reality that stems from the fact of tribulation. First of all, the reception they received from the islanders. It could have been so different! This was God's gracious provision for His honoured servant. One of the sweet and blessed compensations of being called to walk a thorny road is the secret ministry of the comforts of God and the infinitely tender touches of His gracious hand, as if to say, 'You must needs come this dark and difficult way, for it is My plan and purpose for you at present; but I will make it as bearable as it is possible to be, with the whisper and assurance of My love.' Not less wonderful was Paul's miraculous preservation from the snake-bite, recalling the promise of Mark 16:17, 18. It was a sovereign dispensation from God. This man was needed at Rome, and a man is immortal until his work is done!

265) 28:7-16

The second lesson that stems from the fact of tribulation is the fruitfulness of Paul's testimony in Malta. God creates wonderful opportunities for witness for those who are 'usable'. When a man's life is utterly yielded to God, every moment tells for Him. All along this voyage, Paul's life counted - in the storm, among the soldiers, on shore. He left a trail of blessing in his wake. What could the soldiers have thought of this extraordinary prisoner? They were used to the idea of power, but no Roman authority ever made an impact on the island as Paul did. Even casual contacts were fraught with opportunity. The three months on the island were charged with destiny for the people of Malta, and we cannot doubt that they made good their opportunity, if their treatment of Paul and his companions was any indication. They were made honoured guests! God does not do things by halves. They had to be prisoners - it was in His providence and purpose for them at that time - but He certainly saw to it that theirs was no ordinary prisoners' fare!

The RSV translates 14b 'And so we came to Rome', according to promise, a road with many hazards and dangers, but one safe in the leading of God and enriched by His goodness at every turning. Great is His faithfulness!

266) 28:7-16

We should not miss the lesson on the encouragements of God contained in the verses describing the welcome Paul had from his fellow-believers in Rome (14, 15). It is clear that their contact with him was made at an opportune moment, at the time when he needed them most, for his courage, it is implied, needed uplifting (15b). The reality and wealth of the Christian doctrine of the communion of the saints was never more gratefully portrayed. Who were these brethren? It does not say, but perhaps we may get some indication from the remarkable catalogue of names in Romans 16, believers to whom he sent his loving greetings some years earlier. It does not require much imagination to realise with what love and tender eagerness they would have gone out to meet him, as he came to them in fulfilment of his long cherished hope and prayer, but in circumstances so different from any either he or they could have envisaged when he wrote Romans. This also was God's provision for His servant, as it so often is in the experience of God's people. The practical blessings of shared fellowship in the burdens and exigencies of the Lord's work are simply enormous and incalculable. Fellowship as an appointed means of grace in the Church of Christ is one of the great enrichments of spiritual life. How much we wrong God and do harm to ourselves when we disdain to make full and diligent use of it!

267) 28:17-24

Now we see Paul in Rome, the prisoner of the Lord and ambassador of the gospel, holding forth the word of life. It is clear that it was no ordinary imprisonment - no ordinary prisoner either. To Paul the situation was simply another opportunity for service in the gospel, nor was he slow to buy up the opportunity, for only three days were allowed to elapse before he was up and doing. Three days - after that long and arduous voyage so fraught with danger and peril! Ah, one senses the spirit of urgency and crisis with which Paul regarded his God-given task. There was no time to lose.

It is difficult to read his words of greeting and explanation to the Jews whom he invited to meet him without thinking almost instinctively of some passages in his epistles which are eloquent commentaries and explanations of his words and attitude, e.g. Col 4:5, 6. How wise and conciliatory he was towards them, seeking to anticipate and remove every possible cause of offence or stumbling-block from their way, and commend the name of Christ to them. Nor was this transparently honest and earnest approach without effect, for it won him a hearing for his gospel and an openness of mind on the part of the Jews (21, 22). And his message to them? We are told that he 'expounded and testified the kingdom of God' (23), that is to say, he opened up its objective truths and also substantiated what he said from his own personal experience of that kingdom's grace and power, persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the law of Moses and out of the prophets. This was his invariable practice (cf Acts 17:3); throughout, his contention was ever that the gospel of Christ fulfils the Old Testament, giving meaning to it as nothing else can, that Christ is what the Old Testament is all about, and that he is a true Jew who sees and discovers this to be so, and that those who do not, have misunderstood their whole tradition and heritage. And this, for Paul, was so vast a message, so mighty and compelling, that it took him all day to do justice to it. Let us note that if he preached from morning till evening, his hearers clearly found it so arresting that they were prepared to listen from morning till evening as well!

268) 28:17-24

The reference to the law of Moses and the prophets reminds us of what is said in Luke 24:27 of our Lord's own procedure with His disciples after the Resurrection. He also began at Moses and all the prophets, expounding in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself, and this is some indication that Paul was not following any 'line' of his own, but doing what Christ Himself had done. This teaching on the fulfilment of prophecy in the Person of Christ must have been a well-nigh irresistible argument with the Jews, and unanswerable, as they realised that the age-old promises had to come to pass before their very eyes. The reaction to Paul's teaching is given in 24: some believed the things that were spoken, and some believed not. This does not mean that while some were impressed, others were able to see flaws in his argument which nullified its effect on them. Men are not brought to faith by arguments that are open to question. Nor, as a matter of fact, are they brought to faith simply by means of a convincing argument, although we do not discount the importance of a convincing argument - otherwise what would be the point of presenting a reasoned case for the gospel at all? - But over and above the reasoned case, there is the moral impact on the will of intellectual conviction. This is seen very clearly in the story of the disciples on the Emmaus Road. Having heard for the first time the meaning of their Scriptures, having understood their fulfilment to be in Christ, having realised the kind of Christ He was, and what He had done at such cost for their sakes in giving Himself unto death for them, these men wanted Him. That was their response, and they constrained Him to abide with them. This is the real meaning of the words in 24 here. They wanted this Christ of Whom Paul spoke.

269) 28:25-31

Irresistible and unanswerable though his argument was, the gospel Paul proclaimed was resisted by many of the Jews. They would not believe, not because they were not convinced but, being convinced, they would not yield their wills and their hearts to the truth of God. And, because they would not believe, in the end they could not believe and light was judicially withdrawn from them. This is the force of the solemn words in 26, 27 from Isa 6:9. God's Spirit does not always strive with men, and opportunity does not knock for ever. But the rejection of the gospel by the Jews was the opening of the door of grace to the Gentiles, as Paul points out in 28. The deeply mysterious link between the rejection of the Jews and the blessing of the Gentiles is expounded fully in Romans 9-11, but it is simply hinted at here. It is not the explanation of that mystery, but simply the fact we are concerned with. For what we are meant to take from these words, and from the book as a whole, is that the record of Acts represents merely the beginning of the work of God among the Gentiles and that that work extended beyond the end of this record 'none hindering'. It is wonderfully impressive to realise that the Christian history of the western world is the result of this outward movement. Nevertheless, it is just as impressive to look back over Acts and see just how much was accomplished in that generation of the early Church. At the outset, Jesus had said, 'Ye shall receive power and....ye shall be witnesses unto Me....unto the uttermost parts of the earth.' What a glorious fulfilment these words received! The history of Acts spans a period of some 30 years - that was all the time it took for the gospel to spread from Jerusalem to Rome, renewing the face of the ancient world!

270) 28:25-31

Behold, then, the onward march of the Church of God, terrible as an army with banners! Paul was a prisoner, but not Rome's. He was Christ's bondman, and the word of God was not bound. Not even mighty Rome can forbid when Christ commands. The word of God multiplied, overcoming all hazards, pressing them into the service of the gospel, as witness Paul's imprisonment here, for out of it came the 'Prison epistles', as we believe, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon. We may well agree with him that the prison experience was no hindrance to the work of God but was rather for its furtherance (Phil 1:12). Apostles may be imprisoned but not the gospel and God is able to provide hearers for His good news (30) when He has a dedicated instrument at hand for His use. Paul held open court for the gospel, his bonds royally ignored in the further strategic outreach of the word of salvation. Not for nothing, and not without justification, was he able to testify, 'In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us.'

Here, then, is the record of a glorious chapter of Church history, a story of the expansion of the work of the gospel in a pagan, bankrupt, discredited and disillusioned world. Should not every chapter read like it? At all events, it is possible to explain why this particular chapter reads thus, and in so doing we can sum up the message of the book, and find a challenge to ourselves, in this bewildered, unsure and bankrupt age in which we live. For this wonderful work may be said to have depended on three basic factors, to which we shall turn in what follows.

271) 28:25-31

The first factor is: a full gospel. These men had a message from God, a sure word from on high, authoritative, commanding, compelling, a word of forgiveness and new life. It was a word (i) about Christ and (ii) based on the Scriptures (cf Acts 20:27, Rom 15:19). It was the glory of the Reformation that it placed its emphasis here, that a whole Christ can be mediated only through the whole of the Scriptures. It is here we need to recover the word today in the Church. Our Christ is too small because our Bible is too small. We must preach the Word in all its fulness again, for this is the word God has for our day and generation, as it was for Paul's, to be spoken without fear or favour to men.

The second factor in the early Church's advance was: a praying Church. Basically and at heart, it was a Church that had learned to pray and to prevail with God. Consider the following references, Acts 4:23-31; 12:1 ff, 1.3/14, Rom 15:30-32, and the sequel to this last in the events of Acts 27/28. God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform. The reason why we do not see the miraculous and outstanding happenings of these early days in our time is that we do not pray as they prayed. Prayer is the most neglected factor in the life of the Church today.

The third factor was: consecrated lives, lives that were utterly and wholly devoted to Christ. 'This one thing I do', cried Paul, and in this spirit he was ready not to be bound only, but also to die for the name of the Lord Jesus (21:13). In this costly attitude of sacrificial love, he waxed mighty for the gospel and turned many to righteousness.

They were men that were mastered by the gospel.

Now, all these things are things we can do and be. We can witness to a full salvation; we can pray without ceasing; we can give ourselves wholly in devotion to Christ. Nor may we think we have grasped the message of this dynamic book if we have not seen that this is the challenge it presents to us. God grant that in the reading of it our hearts may have caught something of its fire!

272) Postscript

The following notes are from the substance of an address given at a missionary conference under the title 'Principles of Church Expansion in Acts'. They serve to form a fitting conclusion to our study of the history book of the early Church.

Acts is a very disturbing book, as anyone who begins to read it seriously will soon find out. It is very disturbing to many of our accepted ideas in evangelical thinking, and in a number of ways, as we shall see. This is all to the good: Christian life is a continuing conformity to the word and will of God.

Acts is a history book, essentially considered, and this should help us to remember that we should not be too intent on building doctrines or systems of doctrine on statements made within its pages. It is said that the first disciples of Pentecost 'continued in the apostles' doctrine', but we should realise that that doctrine is to be found, not in Acts, but in the Epistles. This, if it were more widely recognised, would save us from the more extreme misinterpretation of certain ideas and doctrines (of for example, what is said in Acts about the Spirit and the reception of the Spirit. There is no set pattern in Acts - a glorious freedom and inconsistency prevails. The teaching is crystallised, however, in the Epistles).

At the same time, however, throughout the throbbing pulse of vitality in Acts, it is possible to discern definite principles at work, principles which govern the ongoing and outgoing of the word and work of the gospel. And these are our concern in this study.

273) The Divine Plan

Significantly, the movement of expansion in Acts began with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Basically, this is the essential pre-requisite for any movement of expansion today. Without the Spirit, no effort or enterprise will avail anything. It is the energy and enterprise of the Spirit that makes expansion possible in the life of the Church. Acts 1:8 is the operative verse, and the seed from which everything else springs: "Ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you, and ye shall be witnesses unto Me, beginning at Jerusalem, and in Judaea, and Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the world."

Notice the outward development, like the rings in a pool of water when a stone is dropped in it - ever widening circles, reaching out and out. This pattern is unfolded in the succeeding chapters of Acts. The first few chapters describe the preaching and the witness in Jerusalem. It is at chapter 8 that movement and development begin, with the persecution that followed upon Stephen's martyrdom (8:1): Judaea, then Samaria, became the focus of spiritual attention.

Then, a few chapters further on, Antioch becomes prominent (11:19). The circles of influence are now widening, and in 13:1-4, we see a new major development which begins the fourth stage of our Lord's word - "the uttermost parts of the earth" - into Asia Minor. Then, in chapter 16, across to Greece and Europe: and in chapter 20ff the movement westwards to Rome; and if tradition be correct, later still, after the Rome imprisonment, to Spain and the regions beyond.

It is very wonderful to see this steady, almost inexorable fulfilment of our Lord's word in 1:8 - the unseen Hand guiding operations, fulfilling His will, none hindering (Acts 28:31).

Note, this is planned expansion. It is true that the Scriptures say the disciples 'went everywhere preaching the word' (8:4); but it was an 'everywhere' dictated and controlled by the Spirit of God. There is almost a restrictiveness rather than an expansion in the pattern (cf Acts 16); smallness rather than diversity, in order to attain the final objective. Strategic objectives were ever in view, and much was left aside and undone, in order finally to reach Rome. The work in Ephesus is a good example of this (Acts 19), for it was a strategic centre from which influence would radiate throughout an entire region.

This idea of directed witness is an important one, and should be recognised more than it often is. If it were, a vast amount of earnest, well-meaning labour and toil, often expended for very little result, would be avoided, and a new, meaningful and fruitful thrust given to the work of the gospel. When a farmer hires men to help him with his harvesting, he does not set them loose in the corn fields in a haphazard fashion and bid them carry on as they think fit, they must work under his control and direction. Nor is it different in the work of the kingdom.

This outward movement is just as much a pattern for individuals. We begin at Jerusalem, at home. If we have not been a success there, how should we expect to be more effective further afield? As Hudson Taylor said, "Crossing the sea does not make a man a missionary."

274) The Divine Plan and Human Inertia

This outward movement of expansion took place in face of what I will call an undoubted spiritual inertia. What I mean is this: there were human factors which might well, but for the over-ruling, over-riding sovereign grace of God, have hindered and stultified the work of expansion. In fact, every new development took place in spite of, rather than because of, the Church, and this is true even in the context of the Pentecostal effusion of the Spirit of God.

For example, there is no sign of any real awareness of the fact that this gospel was designed for a worldwide mission, and it would seem that the first Christians were content (i) that it should establish itself at Jerusalem, and (ii) that it should confine itself to the Jews. Regarding (i), it took persecution to drive the gospel far afield. Regarding (ii) it took a special vision, given to Peter, and a special outpouring of the Spirit on Cornelius, to convince a reluctant, Jewish-based Church that the Gentiles were to be fellow-heirs with the Jews.

How difficult it was for Peter to see that the gospel was wanting to burst out to the Gentiles, and how tardily and unwillingly he conceded this in the end! Undoubtedly there were tensions present in the Early Church due to this lack of real understanding of the world vision of the gospel. And even when Peter himself was convinced, he was hard put to defend himself against the charge brought against him by the Jewish Christians (11:1-18). But when he rehearsed his experience in the house of Cornelius, this seems to have convinced his critics. This is important, for it shows that they were at least prepared to be convinced, and to receive the idea of a new development in the life of the Church. The real danger in Christian life arises when men's minds are so closed by blind prejudice that they are not prepared to be convinced by any kind of evidence put before them. This is to sin against the Holy spirit and to hinder and limit His working, and Christ's cause has suffered, and His work has withered, in communities and fellowships where strongly entrenched prejudice has been mistaken for true conviction, and minds have not been prepared to give the Spirit the freedom He desires and demands. You cannot imprison the Holy Spirit in a narrow hidebound system; to try to do so, consciously or unconsciously, is to grieve Him away. He withdraws, and a glory departs with Him.

This is both wonderfully encouraging, and also frightening. Encouraging, because it reveals a Divine Sovereignty that is not prepared to be hindered by our weakness and lack of vision. Frightening, because there are not wanting evidences that God finally had

to bypass His reluctant and tardy disciples in favour of those who would follow His leading:

- (i) Saul was chosen, as one who seemed big enough in moral, spiritual and intellectual stature to interpret the gospel to the world.
- (ii) The spiritual initiative passed from the Church at Jerusalem to Antioch, and it was from there, Antioch, not Jerusalem, that the real missionary expansion took place (Acts 13:1-4). Was this due to the failure of Jerusalem to discern the time of her visitation? For whatever reason, it did pass. It may have been a natural development. In any case, we, today, must be quick to learn when the Spirit moves in this way - e.g. from one form of evangelism to another, from one system or method (cf. Sunday School work, Youth movements, which may have had their day) to another; from missionary body to indigenous Church: the change from the need for missionaries to the need for local ministry. (Is the contemporary shortage of medical missionaries such a bad thing if God is saying something in withholding them? Is the dismissal of many missionaries from new nations today an unrelieved tragedy, or simply God saying something new?).

We see the principle at work also in the special intervention by the Spirit for the expansion of the work in Europe (Acts 16:6 ff) also, particularly, in the 'inertia' of the Church in seeking to prevent Paul going to Rome (Acts 20/21), when merely human love was like to frustrate the purpose of the love of God!

Yet, at the end of Acts, we have the words 'None hindering'. The sovereign victory of God', encouragement and challenge indeed! One recalls Mordecai's words to Esther: "For if thou shalt altogether hold thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14).

275) The Divine Plan and Human Opposition

The Divine plan of expansion took place in face of, and indeed by means of, and through, the oppositions of those who set themselves against the work of the gospel.

An abiding principle is evident in Acts, and indeed in the whole of the New Testament: it is that a twofold response is always evoked by a living ministry:

- (i) Joyful reception of the Word (Acts 13:44)
- (ii) Opposition to the gospel (13:50, 14:2) Throughout Acts, from beginning to end, we see this pattern unfolding, of thrust and counter-thrust, blessing, opposition, further blessing, further opposition, with God always on the initiative. The central message of the Resurrection is that evil has lost the initiative in the world, and can therefore always be taken up by God, and used for good, and for the furtherance of the gospel (Phil 1:12): Opposition in chapter 4 led to fresh Pentecostal outpouring; persecution in chapter 8 led to revival in Samaria and the beginning of outward movement; Stephen's martyrdom led to the conversion of Saul of Tarsus; persecution in chapter 12 was followed by the outreach of chapter 13.

(Compare the China Inland Mission's exit from China which has been followed by such a widespread extension of gospel work in the whole of S.E. Asia, as O.M.F.)

The 'storm' of Acts 27 is a parable of the Church's story in these early days:

"And so it came to pass, that they escaped all safe to land." (27:44)

As Jesus said, "In the world ye shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." (John 16:33).

God makes use sovereignly of natural setbacks and even disaster for His glory, making capital out of the worst Satan can do against the Church.

Like a mighty army
Moves the Church of God.

276) The Inspiration and Source of the Outreach

The advance and development of the work of the early Church were on the strength of the dynamic Word of the gospel, and the reality of a living ministry, and as a direct fruit and effect of this. It is important to realise that missionary outreach is itself the effect of something else. There was, and ought always to be, a spontaneous expansive power inherent in the living testimony of the gospel.

Dr James Denney says, "There ought to be more missionary interest in our churches than is actually found, and the fault lies in the last resort not in the nature of the appeals which are made for missions, but in the minds to which they are addressed. 'Some people', I once heard a distinguished missionary say, 'do not believe in missions. They have no right to believe in missions: they do not believe in Christ'. This goes to the root of the matter. It is not interest in missions that we want in our churches at this moment, but interest in the gospel. Apart from a new interest in the gospel, a revival of evangelical faith in Christ as the Redeemer, I believe we shall look in vain for a response to missionary appeals....If there is little missionary interest in the churches, depend upon it, the reason is that there is little evangelic interest. The wonder of that redeeming revelation that made the first disciples Apostles has faded away, and we must revive it by standing where the Apostles stood, and seeing Christ in the awful and glorious light in which they saw Him, if new life is to enter into missionary work."

Look at Acts 11:19-26 (especially v26) and Acts 13. The great 'foreign' missionary outreach began from Antioch - and it issued from a Church that was deeply taught in the Word. Always where the Word is established does the Holy Ghost speak and thrust out men into the work - not necessarily missionaries for overseas, not necessarily students for the ministry; perhaps new forms of witness, for the Spirit is sovereign. This 'repeats' itself inevitably. The Word and the establishing of its ministry, is the real issue, and the other flows, almost incidentally, from it.

Not only so: in Antioch grace was visible (11:23). This is the ground and basis of 'outreach'. The Word is made flesh in us. We live Christ. This is how the gospel is propagated. We have both a message to proclaim and a life to live.

A full-orbed ministry of the Word produces living witnesses, as Paul indicates in Ephesians 4:11 ff, where he speaks of the equipment of the saints for the service they are to render, through the divinely instituted ministry of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. It is this that leads to the increase of the body (Eph 4:16).

Missionary outreach comes from this naturally, and without any forcing or pressure. The New Testament speaks of the establishing of the Church, and the institution of gifts by the Spirit - properly equipped fellowships - when the Spirit is allowed to have His way, i.e. where Christ is allowed His rightful place as King. It is striking to note that in Acts there is no evidence of appealing for missionaries to go out, nor in the Epistles. No appeal is needed! Where the emphasis is in the proper place - i.e. a deeply taught Church, God will give some to be - missionaries!