

# ***Courageous Churches***

## **Student Guide**



**13 online adult Sunday school lessons  
designed for churches willing to risk  
on behalf of the gospel**

**Produced in partnership with the Baptist General Association of  
Virginia and Trinity Baptist Church, San Antonio, Texas**

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The biblical witness singles out acacia wood for its uniqueness. The only wood mentioned in the building of the ark of the covenant, the tabernacle and the altar is acacia. Acacia wood is listed with other precious objects—gold, silver, fragrant incense, onyx stones—given to honor God.

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Acacia Resources will guide Christians and draw them godward, as the ark of acacia wood guided the people of Israel in their journey and represented the presence of God in their midst.

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A *Courageous Churches* Leaders Guide is also available from Acacia Resources ([www.acaciaresources.com](http://www.acaciaresources.com)).

## Preface

Have you ever heard of André Trocmé and his congregation? Almost no one has. Yet this forgotten story of a courageous church provides a word of hope and a pointed challenge.

When the Nazis occupied France during World War II, Trocmé said, “We will resist whenever our adversaries will demand of us obedience contrary to the orders of the Gospel.” He called his Protestant church members in Le Chambon to fulfill the biblical mandate to provide refuge for the persecuted (Deut 19:2-10).

Together with his wife, Magda, and many others, Trocmé organized a non-violent rescue network in their church and in surrounding villages. Literally thousands of Jewish refugees received shelter and then were smuggled to safety. When French police arrived one morning demanding that Trocmé turn over the hidden Jews, he refused. By one account, Trocmé said, “These people came here for help and for shelter. I am their shepherd. A shepherd does not forsake his flock.”

Such spiritual bravery and moral fortitude created an environment that would lead a rabbi to say, “Le Chambon became the safest place in Europe for a Jew to live.”

Years later, Yad Vashem, Israel’s national Holocaust memorial, recognized the Trocmés and the people of Chambon for their courage.

Sadly and regrettably, not all churches are courageous.

In 1994, 800,000 people were murdered in 100 days in Rwanda, a small African country where two-thirds of the people are Christian. Fleeing from genocide, ethnic Tutsis sought safety in churches. Rather than sanctuaries, the churches instead became slaughterhouses.

One of the most chilling accounts took place at a Christian camp in Mugonero, where Tutsis had gathered, including seven pastors. Upon hearing of a pending massacre, the pastors asked Church President Elizaphan Ntakirutimana, an ethnic Hutu and a community leader, for help. They wrote, “We have heard that

tomorrow we will be killed with our families, and we ask you in the name of the Lord to intercede on our behalf, just as Esther saved the Jews.”

Not only did Ntakirutimana choose not to help, he also presided over the mass murder at the camp. He was later arrested in Laredo, Texas, and was eventually extradited to Rwanda.

Again and again, Rwandan churches failed their communities in a time of crisis.

Between the courageous churches and the cowardly ones reside the indifferent churches—churches that do little harm and show little faith. These are the churches that feel comfortable, care too little, ask almost nothing of their members, run few risks, turn a blind-eye to the world’s suffering and a deaf ear to the call of God.

### **Courageous Churches**

When the Baptist General Association of Virginia (BGAV) called for courageous churches in 2002, it launched a visionary initiative that promises to focus and to energize churches for the advance of God’s kingdom.

As the sun rises on the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the world needs courageous churches. In a borderless world of global travel, nonstop information and competing values, churches face more challenges and opportunities to give witness to the Christian faith and to do the work of the gospel than ever before. The numbing pace of change necessitates the bravery to take new initiatives, the fortitude to take more risks and the pluck to give more generously. Now is the time for courageous churches.

In partnership with BGAV and with the support of Trinity Baptist Church in San Antonio, Texas, the Baptist Center for Ethics has produced these lessons to dare churches to define themselves as courageous congregations and to equip churches for the journey out of their comfort zones into risky territory.

These lessons are designed to help adults explore examples of biblical courage, examine the biblical marks of the church and excavate the biblical accounts of courageous churches. Lessons and class discussions will surely increase awareness, sharpen

thinking and prime the pump for a deeper openness to God’s leadership. However, these lessons are only a beginning point.

The call to courage must be accompanied by a commitment to live courageously.

# Biblical Examples of Courage

## Abram: The Courage to Follow a New Vision

### Genesis 12:1-9

**Key Verses:** <sup>1</sup>Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. . . .” <sup>4</sup>So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

**Theme: Courage is the fuel that helps us follow fresh visions for new destinations.**

### Introduction

“He is brave,” Daniel said about Matthew, one of his fellow Sudanese refugees. Mach, another refugee, replied, “Everybody is brave.”

Indeed, breathtaking bravery runs through the numerous accounts about the Lost Boys of Sudan. Another trait is their astonishing faith.

When war came to southern Sudan in 1987, fathers were killed, mothers were violated, sisters were taken as slaves and villages were torched. Many boys survived by fleeing into the bush to hide. After the attackers left, the boys found each other. Older boys cared for and even carried younger ones. Together they trekked across hundreds and hundreds of miles, heading away from the violence.

International relief workers named these orphaned Dinka and Nuer children the Lost Boys, after the boys in the story of Peter Pan.

As many as 40,000 orphaned boys fled from the Sudanese civil war. Those who survived hunger and predatory animals reached safety in Ethiopia. A few years later, another army forced the boys

to flee. In the pell-mell chaos, many of the boys drowned in the Gilo River or were eaten by crocodiles as they sought safety in Kenya.

Daniel, now 22, told the *Fort Worth-Star Telegram* that his village was attacked when he was seven years old. He escaped and became one of the Lost Boys. At age 11, he was baptized and took a new name. He chose Daniel from the biblical story of Daniel and the den of lions, because Daniel had a strong faith.

Some 4,000 Lost Boys have been resettled in the United States, many by churches. One such church is St. John’s Baptist Church in Charlotte, N.C.

Caroletta Partain, chair of the church’s Sudan Relief Committee, told Associated Baptist Press about the first worship service the Dinka boys attended at St. John’s.

The boys began to sing. “The congregation was spellbound, silently listening to and watching what to us was a totally new way to worship,” she said. “All of a sudden we ‘heard’ it. The words were Dinka but the melody was ‘I have decided to follow Jesus.’ I can’t tell you how moving it was.”

The Lost Boys fled in fear, survived with exceptional bravery and live into the future with a rare courage centered in a remarkable faith.

### Courage Defined

Courage is one of the four cardinal virtues—virtues upon which other virtues are hinged or turn.

An online Catholic Encyclopedia, [www.newadvent.org](http://www.newadvent.org), uses the term *fortitude*, instead of *courage*, and notes that fortitude relates to “manliness.”

Courage is “that quality which enables one to encounter danger and difficulties with firmness, calmness and intrepidity,” according to [www.jewishencyclopedia.com](http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com).

A Protestant dictionary, *The New Dictionary of Christian Ethics & Pastoral Theology*, relates courage to “virtues of willpower.” These virtues “equip us to resist desires, emotions, urges and impulses

that are, in some circumstances if not in all, adverse to the moral and spiritual life.”

Clearly, courage has many faces. Sometimes courage appears as bravery in the face of physical challenges. At other times, courage has a moral component, like loyalty to others despite the temptation to take easier paths. And courage has a spiritual dimension—being faithful to God.

The Lost Boys certainly exhibited these three dimensions of courage: physical, moral and spiritual. They braved tortuous terrain and ravenous animals. They refused to abandon one another. They believed that God was and is with them.

### **The Biblical Witness**

Courage is a recurring biblical theme and is mentioned explicitly.

When Moses sent men to spy on the land, he said, “Be of good courage” (Num 13:20). When Moses instructed Joshua about entering the Promised Land, Moses said, “Be strong and of courage” (Deut 31:7). After Moses’ death, the Lord said to Joshua, “As I was with Moses, so I will be with you ... Be strong and of good courage” (Josh 1:5-6). The Psalmist said, “Let your heart take courage” (Ps 27:14). Micah said, “I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord, and with justice and courage” (Mic 3:8, NASB).

At other times, courage is an underlying theme in biblical accounts. It pulses through the stories about Gideon and David. It is embedded in the Abram story.

Abram’s courage was the courage to hear the new voice of God, to leave his homeland and to journey into an unknown future.

### **Genesis 11:26-32**

Terah was the father of Abram, Nabor and Haran (v. 26). He was also the grandfather of Lot, the son of Haran. After the death of Haran and the marriages of Abram and Nabor, Terah decided to leave his homeland in the Ur of the Chaldeans (v. 31) and “go into the land of Canaan” (v. 31).

With Abram, Sarai and Lot, Terah began his journey to Canaan. For unexplained reasons, Terah settled his family in Haran (v. 31) and, much later, died there (v. 32). Terah never reached Canaan.

At this point in the biblical narrative, Terah disappeared. His name did not resurface until Joshua gave his farewell address. “Your fathers lived of old beyond the Euphrates,” Joshua told the people. “Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods” (Josh 24:2).

The reference to *other gods* is interpreted to mean that Terah had a polytheistic religion. While the biblical witness offers no other insight into Terah, the Midrash records that Terah was a maker and seller of idols. Jewish tradition also recounts the story that Abram smashed the graven images in his father’s workshop and began to believe in one Supreme Being.

### **Genesis 12:1-9**

When Terah died, generational leadership passed from father to son. And for the first recorded time, God spoke to Abram, giving him a destination and a vision.

God said to Abram, “Go from ... to the land that I will show you” (12:1). God also said, “I will make ... and I will bless” (v. 2).

With a new destination and vision, Abram obeyed. He “went, as the Lord had told him” (v. 4). He took Sarai, Lot and all their possessions, as well as “the persons that they had gotten in Haran” (v. 5).

Upon arrival in Canaan, God said to Abram, “To your descendants I will give this land” (v. 7). Abram responded with an act of worship. “He built ... an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him” (v. 7).

In a way, Abram completed the journey begun by his father, who had planned to go to Canaan. But Terah fell short of his desired destination. It took a new day, a new leader, for Terah’s family to uproot itself from its adopted homeland and to move to a new land.

Abram broke with the past. He had the courage to leave the comfort zone of geography, inherited religion and family tradition.

He showed a rare courage to hear God speak a new vision for his future. He demonstrated an uncommon moral fortitude to seek a new way of living in obedience to God. He displayed a physical bravery by moving his family into a new land, “not knowing where he was to go” (Heb 11:8).

### **Courage to Follow a New Vision**

Vision and courage travel together. Vision is the compass. Courage is the risky commitment.

Again and again, vision and courage are linked:

- Abram had a vision and the courage to pursue it.
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s biography was titled *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage*. The famed German Lutheran pastor, who wrote *The Cost of Discipleship* and stood up to Hitler, saw the world differently from others and lost his life.
- Martin Luther King Jr. had a vision of a new American society, one in which people “will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” King had the fortitude to walk for justice and talk for freedom. His dream and conviction transformed a nation.
- St. John’s Baptist Church had a vision of helping some Lost Boys. Members had the courage to get involved as mentors, introducing these young men to American culture, teaching them to cook and helping them with their education.

### **21<sup>st</sup>-Century Culture**

Some people contend that the 21<sup>st</sup> century began on September 11, 2001.

The predicted crisis of the new millennium proved unfounded. The digital time bomb never went off. The computer glitches, electrical blackouts and stock market crash never happened. Y2K was a false alarm.

Instead, unanticipated acts of terrorism jolted the Western world into a gaping awareness about its vulnerability. We realized that commerce, communication and commercialization transcended national boundaries, creating a borderless world of information. We learned anew about the seething hostility within Islamic fundamentalism toward Western culture. We came to the sharp confession that Christian faith and American culture were mistakenly seen as synonymous.

One thing is unmistakably certain. We are living in a multicultural century in which we face a banquet of competing values, agendas and practices. Some choices are positive; others are negative. Living in a new era requires a new vision and a deep well of courage.

### **Toward a New Way**

Depending on one’s perspective, we face either a challenge or an opportunity to do church in new ways in order to be more faithful and relevant to our changing world. Old ways of church exist as a comfort zone. New ways involve risk. Old ways of church cooperation offer well-worn relational patterns; call them ruts. New ways necessitate gritty, energizing change. Old ways of church may even dull our awareness about God’s vision for the future. New ways may test our resolve to follow God in obedience.

So, whence cometh vision? Vision comes ultimately from God. But how?

If God ultimately discloses himself most fully in Jesus, then Bible study is central to vision-catching. Consuming Jesus’ teaching gives us the nourishment for a new way of prioritizing values. Copying his walk allows us to engage dynamically the world.

If the young prophesy and see visions (Acts 2:17), then talking with and listening to the young is one way we can hear God speak about kingdom advance.

If God’s spirit speaks through the elderly (Lk 2: 22-38), then learning from their experiences provide markers of memory for the new journey.

If God's early church made decisions through gatherings for deliberation (Acts 15:6-7), then we, too, must discern the future through reflective meetings about where God is moving in the world.

Like Abram, who did not know exactly where he was going (Heb 11:8), we begin with a vision from God.

What moves us forward is a desire to follow God's leadership. Our brave hearts come from an earnest longing to do the right thing, to live faithfully, to take risky steps.

*Written by Robert Parham, executive director, Baptist Center for Ethics*

## Biblical Examples of Courage

### Jesus: The Courage of Connection and Clarity

#### **Matthew 21:23-27**

**Key Verse:** <sup>24</sup>Jesus answered them, "I also will ask you a question; and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things."

**Theme: Courageous agents of change stay connected and speak with clarity in the midst of contentious change.**

#### **Introduction**

I thought I knew courage. Then I met the aging Chinese pastor near Shanghai and heard his story. Arrested, sentenced to prison and hard labor for many years, taken from his family and ostracized by his culture, he endured with grace and dignity. Now, as a result of seismic cultural and political changes for which he prayed and worked, he is senior pastor of a church that squeezes more than 8,000 worshippers into a modest sanctuary each Sunday during the course of five worship services. The day I met him, his arms were aching from having baptized 300 new Christians the day before. No bitterness, no malice, just an undying love for God and the people around him.

For a person, family or church to engage change courageously requires an ability to be clear about identity and a willingness to maintain connections with people with whom we have differences.

Clarity about our identity, whether as an individual, a family or a church, is an essential component of courage. When we allow others to define us, we end up confused about ourselves and our reason for being. Truly courageous people and churches have engaged in some sort of self-definition, and that clear sense of identity fuels their courage.

On the other hand, those who simply define themselves and act boldly without efforts to connect with others will eventually find themselves alone.

You probably know a similar story: At their mother's funeral, two sisters had a misunderstanding about who would sit where at the cemetery. Later, during the distribution of the estate, a nephew claimed several personal items one sister was sure were intended for her. The result was a ten-year-long "cut-off" during which the sisters and their families did not speak or communicate with each other.

Cut-offs in a family or a church are sad and painful. Conflict escalates to the degree that the only plausible solution seems to be to suspend all contact with one another. Cut-offs are especially prevalent when emotional intelligence and maturity are low and when a pattern of cut-offs already exists in a family or church.

Some churches react to the world with a type of cut-off. Many churches find themselves at odds with the prevailing culture of our day. The pace of change is so overwhelming that churches may feel more and more like relics from another era. The secularizing of our society has put many churches into a defensive posture, resulting in a simmering resentment and bristling anger at the way they are ignored, bypassed, ridiculed or misrepresented.

There is great temptation to define ourselves by pulling back from the world, closing ranks and isolating ourselves from the evil things happening all around us. Such a cut-off is reflected in how much of our financial resources we spend on ourselves, how we react to newcomers and how user-friendly our buildings, worship, classes and language are.

One of our most courageous acts may be to remain connected with those who are at odds with us. It requires a guiding vision and commitment to endure despite differences. In a family, it means taking the initiative and refusing to allow a cut-off to continue. At work, it means being proactive about unspoken conflicts and resentments. With friends, it means hanging tough when friends take us for granted, ignore us and our needs or antagonize us deliberately. For a church, it means maintaining a commitment to the unreached people of the world despite their indifference.

This balance, between separateness and closeness, of being distinct without being distant, is the basis for diverse and healthy communities, fellowships and relationships.

## **The Biblical Witness**

### **Matthew 21:1-17**

When Jesus rode into town on Palm Sunday, he ushered in a week that would change the world for eternity. His dramatic entry drew "a very large crowd" (v. 8 NRSV) who determined to treat him like royalty (vv. 8-9). Such a high-profile arrival resulted in "turmoil" (v. 10 NRSV) across the city. The Greek word for turmoil, *seismos*, implies shaking, agitation or great calamity. It is used again in Matthew 27:51 and 28:2 to describe the physical shaking of the earth that took place when Jesus died and when the stone was rolled back from the tomb. Here in chapter 21, it is used to tell us that this unique man shook the city and its temple and all its traditions to their core. What kind of a man can shake a city with such power?

That was the question on everyone's lips as they asked, "Who is this?" (v. 10). Jesus was clear in his answer. Moving to the temple, he identified himself as the owner of the property. "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you make it a den of robbers" (v. 13). By quoting from Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11, Jesus aligned himself with the prophetic traditions of Israel and courageously claimed divine authority for instituting much-needed change in the temple and among the people. His actions were courageous, as he overturned the tables and seats of those who had taken holy things and compromised them. His clarity about who he was and what he came to do provided him with fuel for his righteous indignation at a world that had wandered far from God's intention.

It is no surprise that Jesus' display of clarity was followed by a scene where he was swarmed by those who loved him most: the blind, the lame and the children (vv. 14-15). Self-definition and clarity about purpose and direction are attractive precisely because so few people have the courage to be who God intends them to be. Jesus' courage is a magnet to a world in search of someone to believe in and follow.

## Matthew 21:23-27

After a night in Bethany (v. 17), Jesus returned to the temple the following day (vv. 23-27). For all the courage it took Jesus to overturn tables while people were still seated at them, it was perhaps even more courageous for him to return to the scene of the action a day later. He arrived to teach (v. 23) and immediately was met with another question about his identity (v. 23b). He responded with a question/riddle and threw the authorities into an argument with one another (v. 25). Rather than answer them directly, he told two powerful parables (vv. 28-43) that leave little doubt about who he is and who he believed they were. In the end, they were as clear about his message as he was (v. 45).

Jesus' return to the temple is a graphic example of remaining connected with those with whom we disagree. Courageous leadership requires more than raw emotion and physical acts of defiance. Effecting change that will persevere requires a willingness to stay connected and to see the change through. One day earlier, Jesus had not been interested in cerebral arguments about the condition of the temple, instead relying upon courageous action to draw attention to the problem. But on the second day, Jesus engaged his opponents in a fair, thoughtful manner that reveals self-reliance and confidence that grew out of being clear about his identity and purpose. His ability to translate his courage into connected relationships as well as acts of bravery is an example many have sought to emulate across the centuries.

### The Courage to be Clear *and* Connected

Have you ever known a preacher who felt he had been blessed with the dubious gift of confrontation? He tends to inspect every parishioner, identifying and pointing out all shortcomings. He roundly criticizes events in the community, policies of the school board, books in the library and all things that do not conform to his agenda. Of course, eventually that minister finds himself alone, for his supposed courage is not balanced with a needed commitment to connection.

Some churches employ that approach to the culture around them. Clearly defining themselves, they are known for all the things they

are against. Railing against whatever social ill is in their sights at the time, they congratulate themselves upon being courageous enough to speak up against evil. Cut off, isolated and powerless, they become increasingly irrelevant to real people in the real world.

Contrast that approach to the leader/church that balances courage and zeal with a commitment to remain connected with those with whom they disagree. Such was the way of Jesus and the pattern of those who effect genuine change and influence the culture for the good of the Kingdom.

Martin Luther possessed this important quality in unusual measure. Some assert that he was perhaps as fearless a man as ever lived. When he set out on his momentous journey to Worms, he said, "You can expect from me everything save fear or recantation. I shall not flee, much less recant." His friends, warning him of the grave dangers he faced, sought to dissuade him. But Luther would not be deterred. "Not go to Worms?" he said. "I shall go to Worms though there were as many devils as tiles on the roofs" (Bainton 1995).

True change agents in the church have had the courage to suffer for their convictions while remaining connected to those in their community. Such was true of John Weatherford, a powerful preacher in 1770 in Chesterfield County, Virginia. He became a serious problem for the local authorities when he would not comply with the legal requirement of obtaining a license from the state prior to preaching.

"After various attempts to silence Weatherford had failed, he was arrested, tried, and sentenced to jail where he remained five months. For a while, by permission of the jailer, he stood at the door of his cell and preached to the crowds gathered about the prison. When authorities stopped the privilege, Weatherford preached through the grates of the window. To hinder that, an outer wall was built above the grate, but the preacher overcame that obstacle by having the congregation to raise a handkerchief above the wall when they were ready to hear. He finally gained freedom with legal assistance from Patrick Henry who also 'paid his jail fees—a sum much beyond the means of the impecunious divine'" (Alley 1973).

Despite his mistreatment by the authorities, Weatherford and many other Virginia Baptist preachers like him courageously continued to

proclaim the gospel to a world hungry to know of the love found only in Jesus Christ.

You and I will probably not be called upon to face a papal inquisition, serve time in jail or overturn the tables of the money changers in the temple. We will, however, have countless opportunities to stand firm in our convictions about our faith and to struggle to remain connected with those with whom we disagree.

We need to be clear about some important things, such as:

Who Jesus is,  
Who we are and  
Why we are here.

We are called to remain connected to:

God in Jesus Christ,  
Each other,  
The world for which Christ died.

*Written by Bill Wilson, pastor, First Baptist Church, Waynesboro, Virginia*

## Biblical Examples of Courage

### First-Century Women: The Courage of Witness

#### Luke 24:1-12

**Key Verses:** <sup>2</sup>And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, <sup>3</sup>but when they went in they did not find the body. . . .  
<sup>8</sup>And they remembered his words, <sup>9</sup>and returning from the tomb they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. . . .  
<sup>11</sup>but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

**Theme: Witnessing takes courage in a disbelieving, dangerous world.**

#### Introduction

Christians everywhere recognize the word *witness*, and most heartily affirm it. It's a good, positive word. It's something Christ told us to be and do. While many Christians approach the idea of a personal witness with a certain degree of reticence and even fear, most agree it is one of the church's responsibilities.

*Martyr*, on the other hand, gives us great pause. We want to turn our heads and look away. Martyrs are persecuted and killed for their beliefs and actions, after all. And most Christians associate martyrdom with the ancient past.

Interestingly, though, the words *witness* and *martyr* come from the same Greek word. Throughout history, courageous witnesses have paid the ultimate price for expressing their beliefs.

Stephen was the first Christian to die for his faith (Acts 7:54-60). The Roman Emperor Nero brutally executed Christians in the first century. And others across the generations—Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna, John Huss, Joan of Arc, William Tyndale—have also lost their lives because of their expressions of their faith in Christ.

Christian martyrs are not records in the pages of history, however. Today in countries all over the world, Christians still die for their faith. One source estimates that two-thirds of all the martyrs in Christian history died in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Over 45 million Christians lost their lives for reason of their witness during the past 100 years. Scholars tell us that some 300,000 individuals are killed each year for being Christians.

American Christians know of few martyrs personally. Their stories often remain hidden from us because they occur in remote parts of the world to nameless, faceless individuals, communities, even entire generations.

Perhaps the best-known Christian martyr of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Imprisoned for his anti-Nazi activities, he faced death as courageously as he faced life.

On April 9, 1945, Bonhoeffer was led out of his cell and ordered to remove his clothes. He knelt to pray one last time under the scaffold, and five minutes later he was dead. The doctor at Flossenburg Concentration Camp, who was one of the last to see him, reported, "In the almost fifty years that I have worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God" ([www.westminister-abbey.org/voice/sermon/archives/210702-sermon.htm](http://www.westminister-abbey.org/voice/sermon/archives/210702-sermon.htm)).

Bonhoeffer's example is not meant to sentimentalize suffering or death, nor is it intended to make our faith seem inadequate. Rather, Bonhoeffer's story is a call to courage. We must not forget that ours is a disbelieving world.

While it is beyond what most of us will personally experience, bearing faithful witness to Christ carries inherent risks and requires great courage.

Martyrdom also reminds us of the source of Christian courage: the gospel. Christian men and women around the world do not suffer every kind of persecution and humiliation for a mere religious value or belief. What motivates martyrs, past and present, is the conviction of being grasped by the truth—the truth that God has raised Jesus from the dead. Without the resurrection, our faith and proclamation would be in vain (1 Cor 15:12-19). The resurrection

not only compels witness and is at the heart of our witness, it also is the source of the courage to witness, even in some instances, unto death.

## **The Biblical Witness**

### **Luke 24:1-5**

Luke 24:1-12 tells of the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb. It was Sunday morning, the first day of the week, at daybreak. Several individuals who had observed the Sabbath period went as early as the law permitted to anoint the body of Jesus for burial with perfumed oils and ointments.

Luke contrasts what they found (the stone rolled away, v. 2) with what they did not find (the body of Jesus, v. 3). Their reactions were typical responses to divine revelations: confusion (v. 4) and fear (v. 5) at the appearance of the two men.

### **Luke 24:6-9**

Much is made of the fact that these individuals did not remember what Jesus had told them. Otherwise they would have understood the mystery of the absence of Jesus' body. Two messengers from God appeared to remind them how Jesus had told them he must be delivered into the hands of the opposition, crucified and then resurrected. These individuals had been part of the inner circle of disciples with whom such information was shared.

Once they recovered their memory, they understood the empty tomb and were compelled to go and tell what they had witnessed. They went to the eleven disciples (Judas had hanged himself, Mt 27:5) and all the others gathered with them (v. 9) to report their experience and the good news that Jesus was risen!

### **Luke 24:10-12**

We are not told until the end of this account (v. 10) that these persons first at the tomb were women. Evidently, many women were in the group that proceeded to the tomb that morning, but only three are named: Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Mary, the mother of James.

These women appeared in Christian scripture before this account. They witnessed the crucifixion (23:49) and the burial (23:55). Their continual presence, not only through these events but also through Jesus' public ministry (8:1-3), made them especially valuable witnesses.

The response to their news was predictable. No one believed them. Their words sounded like an "idle tale" (v. 11) or nonsense. Clearly the disciples, like the women, did not remember Jesus' words. And given Jewish assumptions, women were not qualified to testify. The first century historian Josephus wrote, "From women let not evidence be accepted, because of the levity and temerity of their sex" (*Antiquities*, 4:18#219).

No doubt men bringing the same report would have met the same unbelief. However, the fact that the initial report came from women made it particularly suspect. In order for it to be persuasive, the witness of women needed to be buttressed by the witness of men.

Verse 12 is excluded from some translations because it seems to be a later addition to the original text based on John 20:3-10. But according to this verse, Peter ran to the tomb to see for himself. He found it as the women had said. The body wrappings were there, but no body. He left, still questioning what had happened. Even among those closest to Jesus, the resurrection presented a faith dilemma. They found it as difficult to believe personally as they did to tell others.

These first-century women showed courage at several levels. First, they had courage to go to the tomb in spite of their despair and the threat of the Roman forces after Jesus' crucifixion. Second, at the tomb, they bravely listened to the messengers of God despite their fear and the perplexity of the situation. Third, they boldly told the other followers about their experience even in the face of widespread disbelief.

Because of the courage of these women to witness, two men on the road to Emmaus later spoke about the resurrection (vs. 22-23). The news spread. Faith in the risen Christ was not merely believed, it was communicated by a succession of witnesses—one person courageously telling another the truth of God.

## Courage to Witness Today

Today's broken and disappointing world needs believers with the courage to witness to their faith in God though they may suffer for their actions or be placed at risk for their words.

In our own country at the beginning of the 21st century, we cannot imagine someone being killed for being a Christian. Ours is a remarkably pluralistic society with a host of religious options and worldviews. Citizens are free to believe and behave as they like, and tolerance is the norm.

But Christian witness in such a secular and relativistic culture is not risk-free. When Christians act in politics, education, business and sports as though their faith really does matter, they will often face opposition.

Opposition comes in various degrees and forms. Rarely will anyone be threatened with death in American culture for courageously witnessing. Yet those who are grasped by the truth of God in the risen Christ and attempt in integrity to speak and act out of that truth may be attacked with hostility or simply ignored. The courageous risk being exposed to dangers the silent or nominal believer cannot know.

In his book *What's Right with the Church*, William Willimon tells the story of a group of women in a church who were looking for a community service project. They decided to make personal hygiene kits—toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, shampoo—for people in the local jail. Each week, Florence Smith and Myrtle Thompson took a load of kits to the jail.

The first thing the women noticed was the large number of prisoners. They overheard jokes about the police filling their quotas for the week. They heard rumors of money exchanged for lighter sentences. They were also shocked at how the female prisoners were treated. Police frequently made suggestive remarks to the women behind bars.

Meanwhile, the kits expanded to include Scripture portions, quarters for phone calls and notes offering the ministry of the local congregation. The women also began to offer to make calls for the prisoners and help them get legal assistance. Finally, they saw so

many problems at the jail that they organized a task force on local prisons.

That's when the trouble began.

"I knew we were asking for trouble when we let you women stick your noses into things," a jailor told the women. "You ought to stay out of what is none of your business...Why don't you stick to church work and leave the legal work to us. ...You ought to stick to religion, stick to saving souls, and let me handle the criminal element."

"This *is* church business!" shouted Myrtle.

And Florence muttered, "Some of our best friends spent time in jail."

In the end, the women found the police uncooperative. They presented formal complaints against the jailor and his jail to the state law enforcement division. An investigation uncovered improprieties, resignations followed and things changed at the jail.

"This is a small example," Willimon writes, "of what can happen when people begin messing around with the church. Christians, by simply being about their proper business and keeping their attention focused in the right direction, can be a light to a dark world."

What motivates Christians, like these women, to witness in word and action? It is the truth of God made known through Jesus Christ. The Christian bears witness courageously not because it is convenient or might be beneficial but because it is true. Jesus Christ is risen and alive, and that makes all the difference.

Who are courageous witnesses today?

- the mother and father who, despite their teenager's sighs and protests of boredom, continue to insist on the priority of commitment to Christ and to the Church;
- the business owner whose bottom line is to run his company and treat his suppliers, customers, employees and competitors in a Christ-like manner;

- the hospice patient who, just as she has lived for Christ all these years, will now die for Christ with grace and hope;
- the university student who undauntedly studies and holds to the Christian intellectual tradition;
- the local congregation that is not blown by the wind of every marketing and growth trend but simply wants to be a countercultural community that invites people to be shaped by the story of Jesus.

Courage is no longer the fighting spirit of the warrior in battle, but the strong moral temper of ordinary believers everywhere, everyday, who are engaged in extraordinary witness—because it is true that Christ is not dead, but is living!

*Written by N. Keith Smith, pastor, Derbyshire Baptist Church, Richmond, Virginia*

# Biblical Examples of Courage

## Miriam: The Courage to Speak to Power

### Exodus 2:1-10

**Key Verses:** <sup>3</sup>And when she could hide him no longer she took for him a basket made of bulrushes, and daubed it with bitumen and pitch; and she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds at the river's brink. <sup>4</sup>And his sister stood at a distance, to know what would be done to him. . . .<sup>7</sup>Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" <sup>8</sup>And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Go." So the girl went and called the child's mother.

**Theme: Speaking to power takes courage.**

### Introduction

Duplicated on an office notepad and distributed as a motivational tool to scores of employees, the haunting statement by Martin Luther King Jr. read, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."

Sherron Watkins believed this before she ever saw the notepad. In the summer of 2001, the Enron vice president began to live it in a very public way when she wrote a letter to chairman Kenneth Lay warning him about improper accounting methods in the company. In January 2002, Watkins reluctantly took the spotlight but courageously took the stand to testify before a congressional subcommittee investigating Enron and its practices. The Enron dynasty soon collapsed.

In May of that same year, Minneapolis-based FBI staff attorney Colleen Rowley confronted FBI Director Robert Mueller. In spite of repeated reports from her office that Zacarias Moussaoui was someone they needed to investigate, the FBI swept aside requests

that they follow through on the investigation. Shortly after Rowley's concerns became public, Moussaoui was indicted as a co-conspirator in the September 11 terrorist attacks.

And just one month later, Cynthia Cooper, WorldCom's vice president for internal audit, boldly reported to the company's board of directors that the company had inflated its profits by some \$3.8 billion through fraudulent bookkeeping. (That figure has since risen past \$9 billion.) Some of Cooper's coworkers were arrested, WorldCom filed for bankruptcy, stock values tumbled and thousands of employees lost their jobs as the company struggled to survive.

Similar circumstances joined three women who otherwise would likely have never met when each chose to put everything on the line: jobs, financial security, privacy, physical and emotional well-being. They could not keep silent about things that matter.

Still, says Cooper, "There is a price to be paid. There have been times that I could not stop crying."

Many of their coworkers now hate the women for speaking out, believing things in the organizations would eventually have righted themselves. No one at the top of their respective organizations has properly thanked them for their honesty and bravery.

*TIME* magazine named them its Persons of the Year for 2002.

When a colleague called her and told her the press wanted to make her a hero, Cooper replied, "I'm not a hero. I'm just doing my job."

In the dark days after the truth came out about WorldCom, she reportedly read and reread the words of Psalm 23: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me."

Cooper remains on the job at WorldCom's Clinton, Mississippi, headquarters and feels encouraged by the changes she has seen there. "I feel a personal obligation to see this thing to some kind of conclusion," she told a *TIME* reporter.

“In the end,” she says, “it is what life finds in us that makes us different.”

When we find within us the courage to speak to power, lives, families, churches, communities, companies, even nations are forever changed.

### **The Biblical Witness**

Like Sherron Watkins, Colleen Rowley and Cynthia Cooper, Miriam’s name might never have found its way into the public record had it not been for her courage to speak to power. In fact, Miriam is not identified by name in this particular text.

Only twice in Hebrew Scripture—Numbers 26:59 and 1 Chronicles 6:3—is she identified as Moses’ sister. She is most closely associated with Aaron (see Num 12).

Yet it was her polite but firm suggestion that set into motion a course of events that were all part of God’s plan.

Exodus 1 introduces us to Egypt’s new king, who “did not know Joseph” (v. 8). He decreed that all male Hebrew babies be drowned in the Nile River. Into this harsh reality Moses was born.

In spite of Pharaoh’s orders, many other male Hebrew children were also born. “So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and grew very strong. And because the midwives feared God he gave them families” (1:20-21).

### **Exodus 2:1-4**

Moses’ birth narrative is direct and offers few details. He is not named until verse 10, and his parents are unnamed in this text, though we learn their names later (6:20; Num 26:59; 1 Chr 23:12-13). A man and woman married, the woman became pregnant and their son was born (vv.1-2).

Moses’ birth was a dangerous act of direct defiance against Pharaoh’s orders. The older he grew, the more difficult it became for his mother to conceal him. She was undaunted. Using bulrushes (papyrus) reeds, bitumen and pitch, she constructed a

waterproof basket and, ironically, placed the basket with Moses inside into the very river Pharaoh intended to use in killing him.

### **Exodus 2:5-10**

Hebrew Scripture does not specify whether the baby’s mother knew the princess bathed regularly at a particular spot in the river. But the mother intentionally and strategically placed her infant in the water. When Pharaoh’s daughter appeared at the river, she “saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to fetch it” (v. 5).

The baby was crying, and she “took pity on him,” (v. 6), or, as the New International Version translates the Hebrew, she “felt sorry” for him. Some commentators believe the original language conveys a much stronger feeling than sorrow or pity. After all, she not only spared the baby’s life but also entered into a special relationship with him.

That she would do so is remarkable, because she knew immediately by looking at the baby that he was a Hebrew child (v. 6), a child her father had sentenced to death.

Enter the baby’s sister, who had been carefully observing. She offered to go and get help “from the Hebrew women to nurse the child” (v. 7). The princess appeared to accept the sister’s offer immediately. The girl subsequently returned with the baby’s mother, and verse 9 records the princess instructing her to “take this child away, and nurse him for me, and I will give you your wages.”

In another irony, the daughter of the one who wanted death for this and all male Hebrew children became the instrument God used to rescue him from the water, nurture him and train him. She even paid the baby’s mother from Pharaoh’s coffers to nurse him!

Considerable time likely lapsed between the events of verses 9 and 10. Eventually, the child grew to the point that his mother returned him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and “he became her son; and she named him Moses, for she said, ‘Because I drew him out of the water’” (v. 10).

As the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, Moses was exposed to the finest education and training. The Pharaoh of Egypt and his daughter

unwittingly saved the life of and helped prepare for leadership the one who would ultimately bring Egypt to a humiliating defeat.

Though God is not mentioned in this text, his presence is evident. He governed the course of events through three unnamed but daring and courageous women: the baby's sister, Pharaoh's daughter and the baby's mother.

### **Another Who Spoke to Power**

His name may be unknown to some, though his words are often quoted. Like Miriam, he had the courage to speak to a daunting power.

Martin Niemoller was a German U-boat commander in World War I and a recipient of the Iron Cross. Later as a Lutheran pastor, he became one of the few clergymen to oppose openly and speak publicly against the Nazi government.

Speaking directly to Adolf Hitler, Niemoller said, "The responsibility for our German nation has been laid upon our souls and conscience by no earthly authority but by God himself, and no earthly authority can take away this responsibility from our hearts, not even you" (Howell 1999). Hitler reportedly lashed out at Niemoller and eventually had him imprisoned in a concentration camp.

Niemoller is best remembered for saying, "In Germany they came first for the Communists and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me—and by that time no one was left to speak up."

### **Courage Today**

Core values of truth, justice, honesty and morality survive because seemingly powerless people like Miriam, Niemoller, Watkins,

Rowley and Cooper courageously speak up and speak out to people of power.

We best learn a lesson from Miriam when, rather than seeing her only as a little girl hiding in the reeds beside a riverbank, we see her as a young woman of remarkable maturity, faith and courage.

If anyone could have honestly made excuses for not speaking up, it could have been Miriam. After all, she was young. She was female. She was uneducated. She was Hebrew. She was a captive. She was powerless.

Yet she did not stop to count the obvious strikes against her. Instead she acted on what she knew to be right: her brother deserved to live. She who had no power spoke to one who had access to the most powerful.

What are our excuses? In the face of injustice, prejudice, hate, dishonesty and other ills, why do we shrink from our responsibility to work for positive change?

Three women who should have been enemies because of royal decree instead refused to live out their assigned destinies and joined forces to save the life of a baby. That baby became the leader of the Hebrew people.

One voice, one phone call, one letter can make a difference. And the combined voices of God's people, called the church, can effect even greater change.

Courageous individuals, and courageous churches, speak boldly to power.

*Written by Jan Turrentine, associate director, Baptist Center for Ethics*

# Biblical Examples of Courage

## Asa: The Courage to Change Culture

### 2 Chronicles 15:1-19

**Key Verses:** <sup>2</sup>The Lord is with you, while you are with him. If you seek him, he will be found by you, . . . <sup>7</sup>But you, take courage! Do not let your hands be weak, for your work shall be rewarded.” <sup>8</sup>When Asa heard these words, the prophecy of Azariah the son of Oded, he took courage, and put away the abominable idols from all the land . . . and he repaired the altar of the Lord . . . <sup>12</sup>And they entered into a covenant to seek the Lord, the God of their fathers, with all their heart and with all their soul . . .

**Theme: Changing culture requires a gritty, long-term view.**

### Introduction

One of the best-selling books of the 2001 Christmas season was a short, humorous work by John Grisham called *Skipping Christmas*. It is the story of a man who wants to avoid the celebration of Christmas that to him has become expensive, commercialized and time consuming. Admittedly, his motives are not that noble (he wants to go on a holiday cruise with the money he saves). But his example is instructive for anyone who wants to live in a way that runs counter to the surrounding culture. He runs into misunderstanding, censure, ridicule and outright hostility.

When we attempt not only to live counter to culture but also intentionally to change that culture, the reactions of others become even more intense and not nearly so funny.

The Christmas season offers a perfect illustration of the spirit of consumerism that controls our culture. Today Christmas decorations appear in stores the day after Halloween. Christians in

our culture face problems far beyond the commercialization of Christmas, however. Our prevailing culture has an enormous power of entrenched corruption that produces in us all distorted loyalties, aged prejudice, misplaced fears and false values. What hope is there that we can change our culture?

### The Biblical Witness

#### 2 Chronicles 12-14

Asa, son of Abijah, king of Judah, may seem an unlikely model, but he exemplifies how a courageous faith can change culture. Asa was born into a culture that over time had combined various forms of religious belief and practice.

The royal court of his father still reflected the foreign influences allowed by Solomon. The queen mother, Maacah, because of her Aramean origins, worshiped Asherah, a fertility goddess known throughout the regions of Ugarit, Aram and Canaan even before the Israelites arrived.

When Abijah died, Asa was evidently still a young child. Maacah, the queen mother, was the real power behind the throne as long as Asa was a minor. It is amazing that as a young man Asa did not simply assimilate to the easy, attractive cosmopolitan culture he had always known.

Although the chronology of Asa's reign as it is presented in 2 Chronicles 14-16 (and 1 Kings 15:9-24) is difficult to determine exactly, it appears that as Asa was growing into manhood Judah was attacked by "Zerah the Ethiopian" (2 Chr 14:9). Asa led the forces of Judah and Benjamin to victory against the overwhelmingly superior force of this Egyptian army.

#### 2 Chronicles 15:1-6

This victory marked a turning point for Asa. He understood it as God's answer to his prayer found in 2 Chronicles 14:11. And as he returned to Jerusalem, he heard the sermon of the prophet Azariah, preserved in 2 Chronicles 15:1-7. The result was a spiritual reformation of the culture of Judah.

No one, not even a king, can change an entire culture alone. Azariah reminded King Asa, “The Lord is with you, while you are with him” (v. 2). God’s presence was necessary for Asa to successfully change the culture of God’s people. God granted his presence willingly, though conditionally: as long as Asa was willing to be obedient to his ways, God would be with him. Asa also received this assurance: his seeking God would be successful not because of the diligence and ingenuity of his seeking but because God had already determined to be found whenever Asa looked.

Azariah also gave Asa this warning: should you forsake your willing, obedient search for God and God’s way, God will forsake you (v. 2).

The warning was necessary. God’s people too easily take words such as Psalm 121:7-8 as an unconditional guarantee: “The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and for evermore.”

But God’s people had been living “without the true God, and without a teaching priest, and without law” (v. 3). Therefore, “in those times there was no peace to him who went out or to him who came in” (v. 5).

The people had chosen to embrace a culture without the Lord, without paying attention to God’s teachings and without obedience to God’s guidance. Their difficult circumstances resulted from their choices, not from a decision by God to disappear. God wanted to be found (vv. 2, 4)! The culture they chose brought disturbance, brokenness and conflict (v.6).

The good news is that God used this trouble and distress to draw the people back to himself. The grace of God expressed itself in God’s willingness to be found even when the people’s seeking came after they had sought everything else.

## **2 Chronicles 15:7-19**

So Asa received a word from the Lord, “Take courage! Do not let your hands be weak, for your work shall be rewarded” (v. 7). With the encouragement of the prophet, Asa initiated a reform that not only affected Judah and Benjamin but also won followers from the

tribal regions of Ephraim, Manasseh and Simeon (v. 9). The reform affected the religious practice of God’s people by removing the Canaanite influences that had been assimilated into the worship of the Lord, and even more tellingly, by repairing “the altar of the Lord” in the temple court (v. 8).

There was a renewal of worship (v. 11) and a restoration of temple treasures (v. 18). But the reform was more than a change of outward ritual and adornment. It was a matter of the heart. The people “entered into a covenant to seek the Lord, the God of their fathers with all their heart and with all their soul,” (v. 12) and “with their whole desire” (v. 15). Manipulation of outward forms alone cannot achieve a change of culture. Asa’s reform sought to be authentic, not simply cosmetic.

A change in culture does not occur without conflict. Asa found it necessary to remove Maacah from the position of queen mother. Such an act must have caused a diplomatic stir, much like that caused by President Alberto Fujimori of Peru in 1994 when he “fired” his wife, Susana Higuchia, as the First Lady of Peru. Maacah was firmly identified with the worship of Asherah, and Asa’s commitment to a religious reform was more important than family ties (v.16).

The cost of cultural change is seen in verse 13 as well. As Christians we are convinced that only a free, willing, uncoerced decision to follow Christ is valid, so we cannot agree with the threat of the death sentence. But we can appreciate the seriousness with which Asa and his nation treated the issue of faith. It was a matter of life and death to them. Even within the Christian community there is no room for compromise with evil (see 1 Cor 5:1-7).

King Asa challenged the dominant culture, which had compromised faith for political expediency and power. He put away idols and restored the way of the Lord in Judah. And God blessed his efforts with an extended period of peace: “And there was no more war until the thirty-fifth year of the reign of Asa” (v. 19).

A generation was changed by the king’s courage and determination to make a difference in the way God’s people lived and worshiped.

There is a footnote to the story, however. It is clear in 2 Chronicles 16 that the struggle to influence culture is a never ending one, and

that our success at one time does not guarantee our success at another. All of us must be aware of the necessity of constant alertness and effort to “not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:2).

## Two Who Changed Culture

Cultural change requires patience as well as courage. We are not assured of seeing all the results our efforts may bring.

On Easter 1786, the aristocrat William Wilberforce began life anew after reading the Bible and conversing with an evangelical Christian. As a result he considered leaving the British parliament but came to understand his Christian walk as “a public one.” His cause was to put an end to the English slave trade. In 1788, his first anti-slavery motion in Parliament was defeated. For the next 18 years, Wilberforce made motions to abolish slavery. Not until 1806 did he succeed. His efforts against slavery in the British colonies were unsuccessful until four days before his death in 1833. Wilberforce truly changed Western culture through the abolition of the English slave trade.

Wilberforce’s success, however, did not eliminate prejudice or injustice in racial relations. There was still much for Clarence Jordan to accomplish as a cultural change agent (or a prophet) in the southern part of Georgia during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. After receiving his doctorate in New Testament Greek from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1942 he established near Americus, Georgia, an integrated community for economic and social justice called Koinonia Farm. The opposition he faced was not always physical violence, but it was just as illustrative of the difficulty of changing culture.

Jordan tells of an encounter he had with an elderly woman after he had preached on the New Testament concept of brotherhood and equality for all in Christ. She came up to him and informed him that her grandfather had fought in the War Between the States and, therefore, she could never believe what Dr. Jordan was preaching. Clarence Jordan answered her, “Ma’am, your choice seems quite clear. It is whether you will follow your granddaddy or Jesus Christ” (Jordan 1972).

## Courage Today

The struggle to change our culture of prejudice continues in this generation as well. We are also called to transform our culture of consumerism and misplaced values. Some call this “the culture wars.” Such a title recalls too vividly the threat of 2 Chronicles 15:13. (And we should remember that Asa did not put the queen mother Maacah to death!) Our struggle is not to put others who disagree with us to death. There is no justification for violence in our attempts to change culture. The Christian change agent will be a peaceful messenger who works with patience as well as courage.

The first step is our own struggle with non-conformity to “this world.” Even this step will not be easy.

I experimented with simplifying my life a couple of years ago when I found myself watching too much television. I canceled the cable service we had. Within two weeks I received at least six calls asking, “What can we do to get you back as a customer?” I explained what I was doing and that it was just a six-month experiment. That did not stop the calls from coming and the company from offering me three months’ free service just for subscribing again. Culture is a persistent temptress, and resistance calls for a gritty determination to succeed.

Cultural change cannot happen through our singular efforts. The community of faith can provide encouragement, guidelines and resources to make a difference in our cities and neighborhoods. Through prayer and an expressed dependence on God, a local congregation can help make sustained efforts at changes in our culture. The missions arm of the church can alert the congregation to economic and social needs that are present. The congregation can speak to local government agencies through resolutions or congregational representatives to confront injustice.

As Azariah encouraged Asa, the church should speak God’s message that gives us the courage to put our convictions into action.

*Written by Gary Light, pastor, Winfree Memorial Baptist Church, Midlothian, Virginia*

# Biblical Marks of the Church

## Church as Royal Priesthood

### 1 Peter 2:9-10

**Key Verse:** <sup>9</sup>. . . you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people . . .

**Theme: The courageous church is a gathering of baptized believers, living as a moral community of nonconformity in the world.**

### Introduction

The movie *Gettysburg* retells the story of the three bloodiest days of American history. In the first scenes, a few days before the epic battle, Colonel Joshua Chamberlain of the 20th Maine Regiment learns that 120 Union soldiers who have mutinied are going to be assigned to his command.

Minutes before moving out to face the Rebel army, Chamberlain tells the mutineers, "This is a different kind of army. If you look back through history, you'll see men fighting for pay, for women, for some other kind of loot. They fight for land, power, because a king leads them, or just because they like killing. But we're here for something new. This has not happened much in the history of the world. We are an army out to set other men free" (Maxwell 1993).

We, too, are here for something new. We're out to set others free as a result of our public confession of faith in Jesus Christ and our baptism (Gal 3:27). But ours is not a physical, military battle. It is instead a countercultural movement that, like yeast in bread (1 Cor 5:7; Gal 5:9), sets out to change the very nature of our world from the inside out.

Ours is a call to be different, a call to nonconformity. Living out the call requires individual courage that is bolstered by our bonds in the

faith community. God's Spirit in us moves us individually and as the church to display God's character in the everyday actions of our lives.

In today's text, Peter described the nature of our liberating mission: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, *that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light*" (1 Pet 2:9).

### The Biblical Witness

#### 1 Peter 2:1-8

Because we live two millennia beyond Peter's time, his use of the terms *chosen race*, *royal priesthood*, *holy nation* and *God's own people* may need a bit of interpretation. In order to understand the force of these images, we really need to understand the situation of those to whom Peter wrote.

While scholars are not in complete agreement, the weight of evidence seems to indicate that Peter wrote this letter to Christians in what we know as central Turkey in the early 60s (A.D.), probably from Rome. Apparently Christianity spread quickly upon its introduction to this area. As the new believers took on new priorities focused on holy living, they found that many of their previous activities and civic loyalties had to be altered.

This non-conformity, however quiet and peaceful, was experienced as judgment by those outside the church and resulted in significant reactive social pressure toward conformity. When conformity was not forthcoming, religious discrimination and outright hostility toward the Christians began to escalate.

Two key terms in 1 Peter are *aliens and exiles* (2:11) and *household of God* (4:17). Rather than feeling at home in their new faith community, the new believers felt more like aliens and exiles in their own hometowns. Peter's letter intended to encourage these despondent believers and to remind them of their secure status in God's own household.

In Chapter 1, Peter reminded the believers of the wonder of the salvation they had received through Jesus. In Chapter 2, Peter began a discussion of what that salvation looks like in daily life, a

discussion that runs through the rest of the letter. Peter created a mosaic of references to passages in Hebrew Scripture and to other Christian themes as he developed his argument. (There are more than thirty of these references in 1 Pet 2:1-10. You may wish to follow the marginal references in your Bible to discover the kaleidoscopic richness of Peter's biblical fabric.)

Life was totally different now, Peter told the new believers. They were to drop everything that characterized them prior to their encounter with Christ (malice, guile, insincerity, envy, slander; see v. 1). Their new life in Christ would be nurtured and sustained by the "pure spiritual milk" (v. 2) God would supply, resulting in spiritual growth.

In verses 4-8, Peter used a theme from Hebrew Scripture, the rejected stone (Isa 8:14, 28:16; Ps 118:22) to connect the past with Christ and with his followers. Jesus had earlier used this phrase in reference to himself during his conflict with temple leaders (Mt 21:42), saying they had rejected him because he did not fit in with their plans.

Jesus was, in fact, the most important "stone" in the building of God's new temple. Although people had rejected him, Peter wrote, Christ was to God chosen and precious. And, as children of God, these "aliens and exiles" (v. 11) were like other living stones in God's plan to form a new spiritual house, a new temple in which God would dwell.

### **1 Peter 2:9-10**

With this background, look again at the focal text, 1 Peter 2:9-10. These verses offer one way to frame the mission statement of the church.

When Peter used the phrases *chosen race*, *royal priesthood* and *holy nation*, he reminded them that their faith in Jesus gave them the same status God conferred on Israel at the time he gave them the Law (Ex 19:5-6). When Peter wrote, "Once you were no people but now you are God's people" (v. 10), he used Hosea's imagery to emphasize that, while they currently felt like "nobodies," God declared them to be "somebodies," heirs of the King (Hos 1:9, 2:23; Rom 9:25).

Christ's followers, Peter said, were to serve as priests in God's new temple, offering services to God. Peter's image of "royal priesthood" in verse 9 provides a primary source for the Baptist idea of "the priesthood of all believers."

Priests make connections between God and other persons. As Jesus died, God tore the thirty-foot-high curtain separating the holy of holies in the temple from top to bottom (Mt 27:51). This action symbolically stated that *every one of us* could now approach God *directly*, without having to go through a priest.

Still, Peter's use of "royal priesthood" indicated that some purpose for priestly activity remained for those early Christians, and for us. What might that purpose be?

Throughout much of Scripture, the function of priests was to offer animal sacrifices as they represented the people before God. Now God calls us to sacrifice ourselves (Rom 12:1; 1 Pet 2:5). No longer were the sacrifices God required physical ones. Instead, they were spiritual sacrifices offered by worshipers who had experienced a spiritual rebirth.

*Pontifex*, the Latin word for *priest*, means "bridge-builder." Our work as priests is to offer ourselves as living sacrifices to God, focusing our lives on building bridges to pre-Christians so that we "may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet 2:9). To be a priest means to be one whose very life is a witness to the reality of God's grace. That, after all, is what Peter reminded "the exiles of the Dispersion" (1:1) to keep doing.

In verses 11-17, which follow the focal text, Peter outlined some specific ways God calls his people to live in, but not of the world. Abstaining from "passions of the flesh" (v. 11), maintaining "good conduct" (v. 12), doing "good deeds" (v. 12), respecting civil authority (vv. 13-14), living as free servants of God (v. 16), honoring all and loving others (v. 17), Peter wrote, would show others what it meant to be born again.

Apparently those and other early believers held fast through persecution, because about sixty years later, the Athenian philosopher Aristides described Christians to the Roman Emperor Hadrian this way:

- They do not commit adultery or fornication, nor bear false witness, nor embezzle what is held in pledge, nor covet what is not theirs.
- And their oppressors they appease (lit., “comfort”) and make them their friends; they do good to their enemies....
- Falsehood is not found among them; and they love one another, and from widows they do not turn away their esteem; and they deliver the orphan from him who treats him harshly.
- And he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting.
- And when they see a stranger, they take him in to their homes and rejoice over him as a very brother....
- And if there is among them any that is poor and needy, and if they have no spare food, they fast two or three days in order to supply to the needy their lack of food....
- This is a new people, and there is something divine in the midst of them (Kay).

### **Courage Today**

Aristides’ description provides a brief checklist we can use to see how well we’re doing at living lives of holy non-conformity in the world. Aristides mentioned such character qualities as sexual purity, marital faithfulness, honesty, kindness toward enemies, care for the socially and economically vulnerable, generosity, hospitality and humility. Our culture infrequently offers examples of these qualities, and it takes courage to make them priorities in our lives.

We live in a 24/7/365 culture that honors virtually nothing as sacred. Well, actually, what our culture seems to honor above all else is “success,” and “success” is almost always understood as “money.”

As I write this, my wife, Jill, and I are vacationing on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. As we have driven or bicycled literally from the northern to the southern extremities of the paved surfaces

of these islands, we have been amazed at the thousands of magnificent vacation homes already here, and at the hundreds of homes being constructed, even in recessionary times. While I’m only guessing, I suspect that quite a few of these homes belong to “successful” Christians. I’ve found myself wondering what Aristides would have said about Christians if he had been here to see this . . . or the cars we drive . . . or many of the other things we do with our resources. Are we guiding our culture’s values or conforming to them?

Success these days also seems to mean involving our children in sporting activities that treat Sunday like any other day of the week in terms of practice, travel and competition. Yes, we live in a pluralistic culture, and this offers another evidence of that fact. But what does Christian “priestly courage” look like in this situation? What would Jesus do?

You and I “are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that [we] may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light” (v.9).

We are called to be a unique moral community of nonconformity that offers our world a clear picture of the creative, reconciling love of God.

I wonder, what sort of letter Peter would write to us?

*Written by David C. Stancil, pastor, First Baptist Church, Bristol, Virginia*

# Biblical Marks of the Church

## Church as Body of Christ

### Ephesians 4:1-6

**Key Verses:** <sup>2</sup>with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, <sup>3</sup>eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. <sup>4</sup>There is one body and one Spirit . . . <sup>5</sup>one Lord, one faith, one baptism, <sup>6</sup>one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.

**Theme: Symbolically, the church is the body of Christ.**

### Introduction

Christian Fellowship Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, is a multi-cultural faith community representing at least 14 different nationalities. Under the leadership of pastor Emmanuel McCall, the church, which once specifically observed Black History Month, now extends its celebration more broadly to include cultural and ethnic diversity.

“We do not emphasize black history but cultural history,” according to McCall (visit [http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=879](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=879) to read the related article).

“[The month] becomes an opportunity to celebrate our oneness in Christ,” he said.

Not only is this an opportunity for people to grow in their understanding of fellow church members and their cultures, it is also an opportunity to affirm individuals from those cultures.

Such affirmations of diversity promote Christian unity. If we can experience, practice and embrace a unified diversity at the local church level, perhaps we can move out from there and begin to do the same in a broader Christian context.

For starters, we might admit that most of our churches are not nearly as diverse as they ought to be. When it comes to race, the church is the most segregated institution in America. Most people choose to stick with “their own kind.” You don’t have to be a church growth expert to know that like attracts like and that the fastest way to grow a church is to emphasize one homogeneous category of people, usually at one age or stage of life. And this likely leaves out or marginalizes others.

The truth is that even if we initially pick a church because it seems to be populated by people “like us,” inevitably a congregation includes folks with whom we might not otherwise choose to be friends. We find ourselves in situations where we worship, study, work, eat and play alongside some who are decidedly different from us. The question then is whether we will stay and tolerate the differences or pick up and leave. Or, will we choose the biblical model of going beyond tolerance to appreciation and care as we accept and enjoy the diversity within church life?

Can we have both diversity and unity?

### The Biblical Witness

All of this sounds rather like a family, which happens to be the most common biblical metaphor for Christian community. Consider that we don’t choose our relatives. We take what we get and make the best of things, bound together by thickness of blood or the equally powerful love of adoptive bonds. We commit to standing by each other no matter what, even if we don’t agree or even like each other all that much.

The Bible bears witness to the fact that, although he may have wanted them each to grow more like him, Jesus did not gather followers who were clones of one another. Consider the disciples whom he specially called. What a diverse group (Mt 10:1-4), from simple fishermen Peter, Andrew, James and John, to Matthew the tax collector, who by profession was in cahoots with the Romans, and Simon the Zealot, who by contrast valued freedom from Rome.

Throughout the Gospels, the individual personalities of the twelve unfold before us. While they tended toward competition among themselves, Jesus called them to cooperation, to a rare kind of community love that would set them apart from all others and

identify them as his followers. “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:34-35).

### **Ephesians 4:1-6**

Although not mentioned as frequently as the family metaphor, extended passages in the New Testament epistles, especially Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, Colossians 3 and Ephesians 4, liken Christian community to the human body and to the “body of Christ.”

Paul, writing passionately to the Christians in Ephesus from prison, began this letter by pleading with his readers to live up to the high calling of Christ. He described that calling as one that displays lowliness, meekness and patience, “forbearing one another in love” (v. 2).

The Christian’s behavior should indicate his response to God’s call on his life, Paul asserted.

By its presence and activity in the church, God’s Spirit creates unity. But Christians within the church have the responsibility to nurture and maintain that unity by establishing positive and productive relationships. Paul encouraged the kind of peaceful unity within the church that requires “making every effort” (v. 3 NRSV).

Why do we need patience, forbearance-with-love and effort? We all know the answer to that rhetorical question: because we in the church are human! To talk of unity, to pray and work for it, is good. But we do not easily achieve it, even in the church of Jesus Christ. We are still human. We remain unique individuals, which means we will inevitably bring together differing opinions, interests, talents—for better and for worse.

The good news is that within the church, particularly when we are each growing in our personal imitations of Christ, we share the values of lowliness and meekness. We want God’s Spirit to work patience and loving forbearance within and between us. And, as listed in verses 4-6, we embrace common beliefs in and commitments to one Spirit, Lord, faith, baptism and God. These tremendous spiritual commonalities are full of powerful potential for

unity, even in the midst of our human diversities, as the illustration of the body cleverly illustrates.

Notice the number of times Paul used the word *one* in verses 4-6, further emphasizing the unity God’s Spirit provides. Many scholars believe this statement was an early Christian baptismal creed that included the chief elements of a confession of faith.

Paul continued in verse 12 of this same chapter by affirming that spiritual gifts are given “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” He concluded these thoughts in verses 15 and 16 by setting forth the challenge to “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love.”

Within the local church, Christians have an opportunity—a dare, if you will. We can courageously choose to experience fully God-given diversity underpinned by mutuality of faith in Christ. In accepting ourselves and each other as equally valuable parts of the body of Christ, we can work and grow together by God’s grace.

### **Courage Today**

Extending our body metaphor, sometimes there are extreme reasons to separate from a part of one’s own body, as in removal of cancerous tumors or gangrened limbs. But we would never casually remove a limb or even a digit. Instead, with the help of modern medicine, we would do all we could to preserve our bodies whole.

Many churches over the centuries have split for seemingly minor reasons. Yet courage is the virtue that keeps diversity within churches.

Take a church like Wilton Baptist in Wilton, Connecticut, which attracts people moving into corporately transient Fairfield County who are seeking a “Bible-teaching” congregation. In my decade of membership there, it struck me many times that this close-knit Christian community included more theological diversity than the typical Baptist church.

Among church members were some with decidedly conservative biblical beliefs and others who might have called themselves liberals. The style of music didn't please everyone. A few would have been happy in a congregation that did not ordain women as deacons. But the fact that there weren't many other church options, together with the warmth and care within the congregation, made staying put worthwhile and led members to see that people matter more than theological fine points or side issues.

Recently women in the church to which I now belong in Oklahoma offered a novel concept. Let's invite others—relatives, friends, neighbors, colleagues—to participate with us in our mission efforts in the larger community, they said. For instance, we could tell residents in the nearby affluent neighborhood if we are sponsoring collections or activities for at-risk kids and invite these neighbors to donate time, talent, goods or cash to the effort. We're a Christian church, reaching out to others in God's love. That doesn't mean that all who would work together in that effort must sign a theological statement, however.

Really this is not a new idea. Millard Fuller has well tested this concept in the non-church Christian organization he founded and leads called Habitat for Humanity. The international group that has built 100,000 houses for the working poor invites all who will to do the work of Christ. No doctrinal test is required to swing a hammer or swoosh a paint brush.

Writes Fuller in *No More Shacks!*: "We may disagree on all sorts of other things—baptism, communion, what night to have prayer meeting, and how the preacher should dress—but we can agree on the imperative of the gospel to serve others in the name of the Lord. We can agree on the idea of building houses for God's people in need, and on doing so using Biblical economics: no profit and no interest" (Fuller, Scott 1986).

Within the local, congregational body of Christ, what can we agree on regarding how we relate to each other in the body? How about this list for starters:

- We don't all have to be the same.
- We can respect our differences.
- We can disagree and still get along.
- We can grow to appreciate and love each other.

- We can work together.
- We can care for each other.
- We can depend on each other.

Some days we may ask how much diversity we can tolerate within one congregation, one family of faith, one body of believers. How much did Jesus tolerate? Jews, Samaritans, Gentiles; men, women, children; learned and laborers; religious and sinners. Jesus was far more accepting, even embracing, of diversity than are we, his followers.

One way to grow in appreciation for those in our body of believers who are harder to love is to work together. Another is to pray for them—not for their change, but that the needs they have be graciously met.

Although many Christians probably do not typically display Celebrate Diversity! bumper stickers, I'm thinking of getting one. Perhaps I'll stick it on my Bible as a reminder—daily, but especially when I carry it to church—to be grateful for individual uniqueness within that particular body of Christ and to do what I can to strengthen the bonds of unity there.

*Written by Karen Johnson Zurheide, executive director, Positive Tomorrows, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma*

# Biblical Marks of the Church

## Church as Way of Life

### Acts 2:41-47

**Key Verses:** <sup>41</sup>So those who received his word were baptized, . . . <sup>42</sup>And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. . . . <sup>44</sup>And all who believed were together and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup>and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need.

**Theme: The courageous church is a way of life, not an escape from the world.**

### Introduction

"As far as I am concerned," Mother Teresa said, "the greatest suffering is to feel alone, unwanted, unloved. The greatest suffering is also having no one, forgetting what an intimate, truly human relationship is, not knowing what it means to be loved, not having a family or friends" (Gonzalez-Balado 1997). Through her work with both the poorest and the wealthiest of people, she fully understood this great desire for relationship.

After experiencing a high and holy calling in 1946 to devote herself to and live among "the poorest of the poor," Mother Teresa spent the rest of her life living out that calling. She cared for the dying and provided homes for orphans, lepers, unwed mothers and people living with AIDS. Wherever people needed comfort and help, Mother Teresa went: among the hungry in Ethiopia, the radiation victims at Chernobyl, the rubble of Armenia's earthquake and the landless outcasts of South Africa. When the walls of Eastern Europe collapsed, Mother Teresa rushed into the communist countries that had shunned her for decades. She became a missionary of love and hope to the entire world.

Through the work she did and the love she gave, Mother Teresa taught the world that the greatest need of all people is to be loved and to live in relationship with both God and other human beings. Many people today still search for such meaningful relationships and true community.

For Mother Teresa, the church was neither an institution nor a building, nor was it simply a Sunday worship experience. Church was a way of life. Church happened on the streets of Calcutta as she went in search of the hungry, the dying and the homeless. Over the course of fifty years, Mother Teresa and her nuns were "church" to the more than 60,000 people whom they rescued from the streets of Calcutta, providing clean beds, encouraging words and the love of Christ.

Mother Teresa modeled for the world the church as a community, learning how to live together, forgive one another, encourage one another and share what they have. She taught us that rather than institution or organization, church is all about relationship.

So today, in the midst of the world's great search for meaningful relationship, the church stands as the place in which the greatest promise of the Christian faith can be realized. The promise is that a meaningful relationship—both with a divine being and with other human beings—is indeed possible.

### The Biblical Witness

#### Acts 2:41-44

The book of Acts offers us a glimpse of the beginning of the church. The earliest gathering of believers in Jerusalem had received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, and 3,000 people had been added to their fellowship. These early Christians were now in the process of learning what it meant to be a church.

Luke's Gospel tells us that their initial effort to be a church involved meeting often. The Jerusalem Christians gathered perhaps nightly to eat together, celebrate the Lord's Supper and pray. They worshipped in homes, went together to the Temple and shared what they had with one another.

These early Christians “had all things in common” (v. 44): a common experience of relationship with Christ and a common desire to worship and fellowship. In addition, they had a common commitment to share with one another and serve people both within and outside of their circle. For this earliest church, church was a way of life and that life was centered on worship, fellowship and service.

Luke described the early church as a community devoted to worship, which for this community meant devotion to the apostle’s teaching and to prayer. The earliest Christians spent time studying. They listened to and reflected on the doctrines being taught by the apostles. They sought to find the implications and applications of that doctrine to their lives within the church. They committed themselves to the task of learning.

In addition to learning, worship for the early church also included devotion to prayer. Most likely the reference to prayer in Acts 2:42 does not refer to acts of spontaneous communication with God; rather, it refers to the Jewish hours of prayer. Earliest Christians continued to practice the devotions of the Jewish tradition. They continued to say the prayers that had been written and repeated for centuries. Those prayers helped them know how to pray.

Eventually, the early church reshaped the Jewish devotions and fit them to meet their new circumstances. But Luke’s account lets us know that these early Christians valued their heritage. They saw the wisdom their heritage provided, tapped into their rich history of prayer and gained strength.

### **Acts 2:45-47**

The early church gathered regularly for fellowship and, most often, this fellowship involved eating together. Around the table, they felt the presence of Christ among them. The breaking of bread reminded them of Jesus’ death on the cross, but the gathering at the table was also a visible reminder of their unity, a unity Jesus had modeled for them.

Throughout his life, Jesus ate meals with sinners. He went into the home of a tax collector and had dinner. He allowed a prostitute to wash his feet during one meal. Jesus was notorious for not making the proper distinction between the people at his table. He violated

social boundaries as he drew sinners into his mealtime circle. The early church followed Jesus’ example. They entered into each other’s homes without regard for social status, and they ate together “with glad and generous hearts” (v. 46).

Perhaps the real miracle that occurred with the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost was that a diverse group of people, men and women “from every nation under heaven” (2:5), were unified into a community of believers. This unity, however, involved more than warm-hearted and affectionate friendships. This unity included wholehearted devotion to one another, which resulted in concrete expressions of concern and care. These early Christians sold their possessions so they could provide for those who were in need.

Some biblical scholars suggest that this portrait of people sharing their possessions and caring for one another is merely an idealized and romanticized view that the later church created. These scholars cannot accept that the early Christians set aside the social and economic structures of the day in order to provide for the needs of all.

But Luke’s writings in Acts offer other indications that such generosity was truly part of the early church, including the story of Barnabas selling his property and giving the profits for use by the church (4:36-37).

Luke provided examples of such generosity through his Gospel. Indeed, Luke seemed fascinated by this idea that followers of Christ would be willing to use their possessions for the needs of others and not just for their own comforts. Think about some of the parables he incorporated into his Gospel: the story of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:30-37), the story of the two debtors whose debts are forgiven (Lk 7:40-43) and the story of the banquet to which the poor, crippled, blind and lame are invited (Lk 14:16-24).

Luke believed that for the early church, church as a way of life meant that individuals were willing to sell what they owned, share with all and give to the poor. They saw themselves not as isolated individuals but as a part of a community, a community whose purpose was to worship and to serve God and others.

By committing themselves to fellowship and service, the first Christians built a well-rounded church, a church that fulfilled the promise of meaningful relationship with God and with others.

A healthy community of faith centered on prayer, worship, fellowship, sharing and service offers the best evangelistic tool for Christians today. Such a community provides hope and care to those within the church and attracts and brings in those outside the church, resulting in people being “added to their number” (Acts 2:47).

### **Seeing the Face of Jesus**

The question then is how? How do we make such a community happen? Once again, we can learn from Mother Teresa. A reporter once asked her why she worked among the poor and dying, and Mother Teresa responded, “They are Jesus to me.”

They are Jesus to me: simple words, but words that will change our lives and our churches. Mother Teresa saw Jesus Christ in the faces of the poor, the outcast, the maimed and the dying. But she also saw Jesus in the faces of the educated, the wealthy and the powerful. In the face of every person she met, she saw Jesus.

What if I lived out those simple words? What if when I looked into the faces of my children, I saw Jesus? What if when I looked into the faces of my fellow church members, I saw Jesus? What if when I looked into the faces of my friends and co-workers, I saw Jesus? What if when I looked into the face of the store clerk, I saw Jesus?

What would my life be like if I lived out those simple words? What would life be like if you lived out those simple words? What would the world be like if all of us who are followers of Jesus lived out those simple words?

### **Courage Today**

Too often Christians see church as a place of escape, somewhere to go on Sunday to get away from the ugliness of the world, the stress of our workplace and the uncertainties of our lives. But the earliest church demonstrated for us that church is not a place of escape. It is not a place to withdraw.

The church is about building relationships, creating a healthy and authentic community of faith. The most desirable outcome is that the church will become a community that offers hospitality and attracts hurting, needy people, drawing in people with questions and fears and offering hope and healing to the world. The strong, healthy, courageous church becomes a community that treats each person as if “They are Jesus to me.”

*Written by Pam Durso, professor, Campbell University Divinity School, Buies Creek, North Carolina*

# Biblical Marks of the Church

## Church as Discipleship-Making

### Matthew 28:18-20

**Key Verses:** <sup>19</sup>“Go . . . and make disciples . . . <sup>20</sup>teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; . . .”

**Theme: The courageous church goes into the world to make disciples.**

### Introduction

When Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, the nature of the church and the state became confused. The church began to do the work of the state; the state did the work of the church. This practice was decidedly different from the days of the New Testament church. The early church devoted itself exclusively to the task of making disciples and often ran counter to the state.

The New Testament church lived as a royal priesthood, a gathering of baptized believers, a moral community of nonconformity in the world. It acted as the body of Christ. It was a way of life, not an escape from the world.

Under Emperor Constantine, however, and throughout the centuries following his rule, conquest and conversion became simultaneous. For example, empire building and evangelism were mingled together in the discovery and colonization of the New World. This practice continued and became the norm for missionary endeavors.

Even as recently as the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the modern missionary movement for the most part still assumed that natives should be Westernized and Christianized. This was the practice of those on the great 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century missionary roll call, saints such as

William Cary, Adoniram and Ann Judson, Luther Rice and the early pioneer missionaries who went to faraway and exotic places like Asia, Africa, South America, Cuba, New Orleans and the American West and Indian Territory.

In those early days of missionary endeavor, making disciples often resulted in individual and community “clones” that looked and acted like Western Christians and American churches. Today one can still see church buildings all over the world that look like churches in the United States. Only in recent years have world Christians made disciples in ways that fit the culture and background of the new believers.

The old paradigm of planting look-alike believers and congregations has shifted. The gospel has spread incredibly all over the world and believers and churches of all races, colors, cultures and backgrounds are making disciples in the true biblical sense.

What does it really mean for a church to make disciples? And how should the church of today carry out this commission of Jesus? The term *disciple* means “learner” or “pupil.” Any disciple’s task is to learn, study and pass along to others the sayings and teachings of a master teacher. The disciple’s goal is to become a follower of the master. Jesus Christ is the Master Teacher and Savior of his followers, his disciples. Discipleship-making simply means helping others become disciples. We do this task best as a church, a body of baptized believers.

### The Biblical Witness

#### Matthew 28:18-20

Jesus Christ gave these instructions, usually referred to as the Great Commission, not to the state but to his disciples. At the end of his life on earth, Jesus instructed his disciples to go and make additional disciples (Mt 28:19). This command was a more far-reaching and inclusive commission than he had given before. Previously the mission was aimed at reaching the Jews. This time, Jesus instructed his followers to make disciples “of all nations.” Jesus’ commission is included in some form in each of the four Gospels and the book of Acts (Mt 28:18-20, Mk 16:15, Lk 24:45-47, Jn 20:21, Acts 1:8).

It is important that we understand the setting and timing of Jesus' final command to his disciples. He had risen from the grave after the horrible death he experienced. After his crucifixion he made appearances to a number of persons before he ascended into heaven to be again at the side of his Father God. Jesus instructed the eleven remaining disciples to return from Jerusalem to Galilee and wait for him there, which they did (Mt 28:10). He met the disciples at a prearranged site, a mountain (v. 16).

There Jesus affirmed his complete authority as coming from God and instructed his disciples to make all the world's nations his disciples (vv. 18-20). He also promised them: "And remember I am with you always, to the end of the age" (v. 20) a reminder that fulfilled Hebrew prophecy. Isaiah foretold the birth of a son who would be named Immanuel (Isa 7:14), meaning "God with us." The angel of God repeated this prophecy when telling Joseph that the child Mary was carrying was conceived from the Holy Spirit, would be named Jesus, and would save his people from their sins (Mt 1:23). Jesus was and is "God with us."

On the mountain that day, Jesus commissioned or instructed his disciples. He gave them a mission that we in today's church share. Though we usually and mistakenly emphasize the *going*, Jesus' primary command then and now is to *make disciples*. Going, baptizing and teaching are all ways of fulfilling the primary command to make disciples. The commission is a worldwide mission—making disciples of all nations or all peoples everywhere. And, Jesus continues to be with us through his Holy Spirit (Jn 14:26).

There is no question that the early disciples and early church committed themselves to going and making disciples. Immediately, they carried out the commission as described in Acts 1:8—"you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." They were to be empowered by the Holy Spirit. Their story of obedience to the commission is described in the book of Acts. Acts 2 places them in Jerusalem, awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit to empower their efforts. Acts 2-7 finds them in Jerusalem and Judea. Acts 8 moves them into Samaria, and the rest of Acts takes the disciples out into the whole world to make disciples.

Philip, one of the first deacons, is one example, but a good one, of how Jesus' followers were committed to going, making disciples, baptizing and teaching (Acts 8:26-27). As Philip went, he encountered the Ethiopian and taught him (v. 35). Philip fulfilled the commission of disciple-making that included going, baptizing and teaching.

Central to Jesus' commission, albeit understated at times, is the concept of teaching "them to obey everything" (NRSV). Though teaching involves instruction, instruction is not the emphasis in Jesus' commission to his followers. The command is to teach obedience—to observe all that Jesus commanded. The idea of obedience is much stronger than the idea of observance (KJV and RSV). The content of obedience prioritizes Jesus' teachings, such as the Sermon on the Mount, and necessitates that teachers of the Christian way (all Christians) both walk and talk the faith. The emphasis is not on study or doctrine, but on actual obedience to Jesus' commands.

### **Models for Discipleship-Making**

Church history reveals two mission models, according to evangelism professor George Hunter in his book *The Celtic Way of Evangelism* (Abingdon Press, 2000). In the Roman Model, missionaries present the gospel and call for decisions. Those who decide for Christ are invited into the fellowship and membership in church. This model requires a certain level of "civilization" and is often confrontational.

The Celtic Model, on the other hand, first establishes fellowship. Community leads to conversation, relationships and ministry, followed by an invitation to commitment. (For more information, visit [http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=1909](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=1909)).

A Virginia Baptist pastor offers us a contemporary example of the Celtic model. He reportedly spends time visiting with patrons in a local bar, demonstrating what it means to leave his comfort zone in order to begin the journey of disciple-making.

## Courage Today

How should we fulfill the Great Commission today? What does it mean for a church to be a disciple-making church? Spend some time analyzing how your church makes disciples. Is it the Roman way, the Celtic way or a blend of the two? Does your church truly make disciples in the way Jesus commissioned those early followers?

First, look at your Bible study group or Sunday school class. Discuss and analyze how your group is doing missions—the Roman way (presenting the gospel; calling for decisions; inviting persons into fellowship and membership), the Celtic way (establishing fellowship; community leading to conversation, relationships and ministry; calling for commitment), or a blend of the two. Analyze and rank the following areas and any other areas you want to identify.

- |                        | <u>Roman Way</u> | <u>Celtic Way</u> | <u>Blend</u> |
|------------------------|------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| • Bible study/teaching |                  |                   |              |
| • Outreach             |                  |                   |              |
| • Fellowship           |                  |                   |              |
| • Witness/Ministry     |                  |                   |              |
| • Disciple making      |                  |                   |              |

In which area is your group the strongest? Weakest? How could your group improve its disciple-making efforts? Are there other things you could be doing? Are there ineffective things you are doing that you can eliminate?

Now look at your church as a whole. Discuss and analyze how your church is doing missions—the Roman way, the Celtic way or a blend of the two. Consider these areas of the church's purpose and life.

- |                           | <u>Roman Way</u> | <u>Celtic Way</u> | <u>Blend</u> |
|---------------------------|------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| • Worship                 |                  |                   |              |
| • Discipleship            |                  |                   |              |
| • Fellowship              |                  |                   |              |
| • Ministry                |                  |                   |              |
| • Missions and Evangelism |                  |                   |              |
| • Outreach                |                  |                   |              |

- Prayer
- Pastoral Ministry
- Deacon Ministry
- Music Ministry
- Age-specific Ministries
- Others

In which areas is your church the strongest? Weakest? How can your group or class influence your church's disciple-making efforts?

As a follow-up to this study, assess your personal role and lifestyle of disciple-making. What are your strengths? Weaknesses? How you can improve the quality of the disciple-making efforts of your group or class? Your church?

Making disciples is one of the biblical marks of the church. Jesus gave his commission as recorded in Matthew 28:18-20 not only to his eleven remaining disciples after his death and resurrection before he ascended into heaven but also for all his followers for all time. Jesus intends for the church to go into the world—close to home, across barriers and out to the ends of the earth.

*Written by Bobbie Patterson, retired associate executive director, national WMU, now living in Solomons, Maryland*

# Signs of the Courageous Church

## A Trusting Church

**Acts 4:32-37**

**Key Verse:** <sup>32</sup>Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and . . . they had everything in common.

**Theme: A courageous church is a trusting church.**

### Introduction

Tension filled the air as the business meeting began at Elm Street Baptist Church. The deacons had employed a professional meeting facilitator and conflict resolution specialist to guide the proceedings. The issue before the church was whether to accept the resignation of the pastor and meet his requests for a severance package.

The church's problems had begun when a personnel committee member questioned the pastor's competency to do his work. Feeling under fire, the pastor requested a private meeting with that person at his office and unwisely chose to record the conversation secretly. When disputes surfaced later about what had been said, he produced the recording. Rather than serving to bolster his version of the conversation, the recording's existence raised questions about the pastor's integrity and judgment.

The conflict escalated within the personnel committee and soon extended to the entire congregation, resulting in the pastor's resignation. Church members seemed fairly evenly divided over their level of confidence in the pastor's leadership. Individuals on both sides of the dispute had threatened to leave the congregation.

The facilitator laid out basic rules for the meeting. Emotions ran so high that he included such guidelines as: no personal attacks, no use of profanity, no cheering or jeering of speakers, alternation

between speakers of opposing views and a time limit for each speaker. The meeting proceeded. The facilitator maintained reasonable order. A vote was finally taken. The church voted by a margin of 65 percent to 45 percent to accept the pastor's resignation and extend the severance benefit he requested.

Many victims emerged from this sad chapter in the church's history, but perhaps the greatest damage was that trust was destroyed. Years would pass before some would fully trust a minister again. The bond of trust was shattered between some church members who had been dear friends.

Trust within a congregation is a fragile and precious thing. Sometimes an overt betrayal damages trust; other times someone deliberately sows distrust within the fellowship to achieve a political advantage or pursue a personal agenda. In either case, the resulting damage is a horrible sabotage of the church's work.

The good news of the gospel is that trust can be restored. It is hard work. Months may turn into years while people work on re-establishing trust in their relationships. Everyone involved must resolve to exercise complete openness and sincerity and be willing to go beyond the usual expectations of accountability. Those who have been involved in situations that have damaged trust must be prepared to go to extraordinary lengths to avoid any appearance of deceit and to reestablish trustworthiness.

The powerful witness and amazing growth of the early church impresses and inspires us. Many of the clues to the future lie in an understanding of the past. As we seek to be faithful in our time, we recognize that our best road map for how to traverse it is 2,000 years old.

Careful study of the Scriptures becomes even more important for us as we look for clues to how the church can be relevant and dynamic in our diverse and changing culture. Commentators on contemporary culture remind us that our "post-Christian" world may have strong similarities to the "pre-Christian" world.

From the early church, we learn that the power of their public witness and their resulting growth were directly dependent on the level of trust among them. Before many churches and religious

organizations today can become healthy and thriving, members must first work diligently to build and maintain trust.

Our world needs courageous churches willing to make difficult decisions, engage in risky ministry efforts and give themselves in sacrificial service to God and to their neighbors. Courageous churches identify their God-given mission and devote themselves totally to accomplishing that to which God has called them. Courageous churches affirm and follow leadership that is Spirit-led and purpose-driven. Courageous churches understand and value their tradition but never allow themselves to be defined or limited by the past. None of these is possible without trust.

### **The Biblical Witness**

After Pentecost, the church in Jerusalem experienced amazing growth. At the same time, the believers experienced social and political persecution for their faith. Many people who began to follow “the Way” found that the cost of their devotion to Jesus was the loss of their livelihoods resulting in great financial need. The congregation included both those who were destitute and those property owners whose assets would sustain them.

Descriptions of the culture within that fledgling church are sketchy, yet they offer a clear picture of people joined in a bond of fellowship and mutual care.

#### **Acts 4:32**

Of “one heart and soul,” they developed a new attitude about the ownership of property. The Scripture says that those who had property did not consider it their own. They looked upon their possessions as God’s provision not only for themselves but for others in the church. In that spirit, they sold property and shared the proceeds with others in need. This kind of unity is rare, because it runs upstream to human nature. Only our transformation by faith in Jesus Christ brings this new nature and the possibility of generously trusting and loving God and other people.

The early church’s sharing was not a form of “communism.” Instead, it was a totally voluntary and empathetic form of giving. The people saw the needs, and, if they had resources, they gladly

shared. Giving of this kind requires trust at two levels. The givers must trust the recipients, and the recipients must trust the givers and their motives.

#### **Acts 4:33-35**

Two noteworthy concepts frame the selling and giving of proceeds mentioned in verse 32. Verse 31 notes that the apostles spoke “the word of God with boldness.” Verse 33 says that they gave their testimonies “with great power.” In this context the boldness and power of the early church are connected to the level of trust and sharing among believers.

A resulting spiritual principle seems to be: When a church is unified in trust and sharing, it experiences increased power in the boldness and effectiveness of its witness. We might also accurately conclude that the unbelieving world is not drawn to a church that is characterized by the same distrust, factionalism and hostility that they observe in the culture.

The early church seemed to understand, either cognitively or intuitively, that they would negate their witness about the love of God if they failed to demonstrate love toward one another. The needs in their midst became opportunities for them to provide object lessons of how trust and love transform lives and systems.

#### **Acts 4:36-37**

The congregation included Joseph, a Jew from Cyprus who had grown up in Greek culture. He was renamed Barnabas by the apostles, a name which meant “son of encouragement or consolation.” A cousin of John Mark, Barnabas joined the apostle Paul in his missionary efforts. But his earliest mention was that he gave liberally and generously. He sold property he owned and gave the entire proceeds to the apostles for distribution to the needy. He trusted the apostles to make wise use of the money, and he trusted the recipients to spend the money well in securing basic necessities.

#### **Acts 5:1-11**

While the early church excelled in generosity and giving, it also faced the temptation of selfishness and greed. Immediately after

the record of the generous sharing of Barnabas and others comes the story of the distortion and perversion of these acts of giving. Seeing the accolades and attention Barnabas and others received, Ananias and Sapphira seemed to want their “fifteen minutes of fame.”

They, too, sold property and brought money to the church. While they represented what they gave as being all they received, it was in fact only a portion. They kept part of the sale price for themselves. We do not know the amounts involved. The amount they actually gave may have been more than the amounts others gave. The problem was not in the amount they gave but in their deception of the church and the effort to, in effect, “lie to God.” That was a serious offense, and it resulted in the early demise of both Ananias and Sapphira.

Part of what made their sin a capital offense was that it contained the seeds of distrust that could destroy the dynamic life of the church. Dishonesty within the fellowship damages and sometimes destroys trust, resulting in diminished love and weakened witness. The church today, as always, becomes an ineffective human institution when it attempts to operate without the power of the Spirit of God.

Our references to the good fellowship of the church often reduce it to simply a social function with friendship, warm relationships and good food at church events. That misses the point. The kind of fellowship the early church demonstrated involved an intimacy of life that allowed persons to share their deepest hurts and needs. It resulted in a joyous and generous response to needs that was a powerful witness to the world. Coming from that place of mutual love and trust, the church went out courageously to bear testimony to the good news of the gospel.

### **The Courage to Trust Again**

Studies of family systems commonly note that we all come from “dysfunctional” families, an acknowledgement that groups made up of humans experience the failures and foibles of life in an environment of sin. All parents make mistakes, all church leaders make mistakes and all systems reflect the damage resulting from those mistakes.

In a “final act of parenting,” after my sons were grown and on their own, I said to them, “I made some mistakes as a father. You know some of them, and you will discover others as you go on in life. When you need therapy, go get it and have the bills sent to me.”

But where does a church go for therapy when trust has been destroyed? How does a denomination re-establish trust when trust has been betrayed? How can a church with a deep emotional wound make peace with its past? How does a Christian move beyond the pain of a trusted church leader’s moral failure?

These questions have no easy answers, but the stories of God’s movement within the early church provide us with some helpful principles:

- The courage for individuals and churches to make the difficult decisions and do the difficult tasks is a combination of personal resolve and help from God.
- God sees the actions of people that show love and generosity, but God also looks upon the heart to see the difference in motive between the Barnabases and the Ananiases.
- Trust in the church is a fragile thing, and once damaged requires great effort to restore.
- Without trust, the church loses its power and its boldness to act courageously.
- Courageous churches and courageous Christians will act to build trust in all of their relationships.

For Elm Street Baptist Church, the story may have a happy ending. Eight years after their conflict, the church is recovering from the loss of members and seems to be recovering from the loss of trust. The present pastor has been with the church for five years. Today there is evidence that many relationships have been restored. The church recently renovated its building, and at the dedication of those improvements a long-time member remarked that it seemed that the whole spirit of the church had been “renovated” as well.

*Written by Bob Perry, executive director, Richmond Baptist Association, Richmond, Virginia*

# Signs of the Courageous Church

## A Self-Defining Church

### Acts 6:1-7

**Key Verses:** <sup>3</sup>“ . . . pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty. <sup>4</sup>But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” <sup>5</sup>And what they said pleased the whole multitude, . . . <sup>7</sup>And the word of God increased; and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem . . .

**Theme: A courageous church is a self-defined church.**

### Introduction

As new seminary graduates, Jimmy and Janet Dorrell moved to Houston where they joined the staff of West Memorial Baptist Church as youth ministers. Ralph Neighbor, Jr., the urban missiologist, was pastor. Rubbing shoulders with an urban missiologist can be risky business for those with a high need for safety.

After building a thriving youth ministry, the Dorrells sold their suburban home and bought two around-the-world airline tickets. Just before leaving, Janet learned she was pregnant with their first child.

They stopped first in Switzerland to talk to Francis Schaeffer at his home in L'Abri. Because of the uncertain health-care conditions in India and Janet's pregnancy, Janet stayed at L'Abri while Jimmy went on to Calcutta where he met Mother Teresa and visited the Sisters of Charity. The Dorrells reunited in Seoul, Korea, where they met with Pastor Yonggi Cho of the Yoido Full Gospel Church and observed the mass numbers of people involved in the church through small groups.

When they arrived back in the United States, they bought a large, run-down house in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Waco, Texas, just two miles from the Baylor University campus where they had first met. They lived on the second floor of the house and ran neighborhood ministries from the first floor. Several other young couples joined their efforts and formed the nucleus of what eventually became known as Mission Waco.

It wasn't just the house that needed rehabilitation but the neighborhood as well. Mission Waco offered a wide variety of pragmatic ministries to a crime-ridden community demonstrating all the signs of urban neglect and despair.

Mission Waco became a lighthouse of hope and care among the poor. Baylor students served as interns. Immersion trips to Haiti, Mexico City and India taught American Christians that the message of Christ was a compelling mission to go to the cities where the world's population was moving in massive numbers.

While offering services and ministries typical for a rescue mission, the Dorrells and their co-workers believed that homeless people needed something more than a handout. They needed a faith community they could call their own. So, in 1992, Mission Waco organized a courageous church.

The church they formed meets every Sunday, rain or shine, beneath six lanes of Interstate Highway 35 near the Baylor campus, a soaring concrete roof over an area roughly an acre in size.

Volunteers assemble a makeshift stage when a pickup pulls up with the necessary equipment. A portable generator provides the juice for a worship band that plays from a flatbed trailer. In the back of the area, tables offer coffee and a hot meal. The homeless, mostly hidden from view prior to this time, emerge and join in the work of setting up for church.

Jimmy seems to know everyone by name. Small groups meet prior to worship, operating more like an AA meeting than a holiness club. Janet, the worship leader, directs the band that sounds amazingly like Bonnie Raitt-gone-gospel.

The passion for this kind of church drives Jimmy and Janet to put into action their beliefs and hopes. It grows out of a conviction that

the world's neediest persons are the particular, focused concern of God.

The Church Under the Bridge is a modern-day picture of Jesus' parable of the Great Banquet.

## **The Biblical Witness**

### **Acts 6:1**

Church history is the story of conflicts and the resolution of those conflicts. The narrative of the early church in Acts originates in a church that was "of one heart and soul" (4:32) and grew rapidly until the stress of growth resulted in a church with a problem.

Since the idealism of Pentecost and a church that was committed to sharing "all things in common," (4:44) a new realism had settled in. The church grew quickly from its original founding pioneers and now a larger, more diverse group assembled as the disciples of Jesus in Jerusalem. Diversity had existed since the first falling of the Spirit, but the cultural and ethnic differences became more pronounced than ever.

"...the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution" (6:1b).

Hellenists in the church identified a problem: an unequal distribution of food and finances necessary for subsistence between their widows and Hebrew widows.

Cultural and ethnic differences between the Hellenist and Hebrew believers joined together in the Jerusalem church were great. The Hellenists differed significantly from the Palestinian Jews by speaking various languages from other Mediterranean tribes and by their willingness to immerse themselves in the culture of Greek and Roman influences. They were more cosmopolitan in outlook. They were attracted to the intellectual and political worlds that united the Roman world. Some were aristocrats. Some were bureaucrats. Some were religious leaders from among the Jewish Diaspora separated from temple life in Jerusalem. They were generally what we might consider today "urban dwellers."

The Palestinian Jews were by nature more clannish. They descended from those Jews attached to the temple and the rural synagogue system. They were guardians of the old ways and the ancestral rituals closely monitored by the priests who attended to the temple. The inclusion of diverse ethnic and multicultural believers was the first dynamic clash within the early church.

Some might say that their differences represented the clash between the past and the future. The relatively insulated, ancient practices and attitudes of faith were threatened by a more diverse, global understanding of the world. This story of the choosing of the seven hints of the dramatic confrontation between Peter and Paul in Acts 15.

### **Acts 6:2-6**

The Jews enjoyed a positive reputation for their work among the poor and widows. Jews who chose to follow Christ continued this good work. Widows outside the scope of this kind of compassion faced almost certain poverty.

A growing Christian community created overwhelming needs, and the apostles had to act. The simplicity of the early days had given way to a more complicated mission. The apostles were being pulled from the primacy of their work. They did not believe it was wise for them to spend their time administering funds for social services. A new body of servants to the church was necessary if the work was to continue (v. 2).

Christian Scripture affirms specific calling to particular tasks of ministry. Jesus heard the call from God at his baptism. He called the twelve to follow him as his disciples. Now those disciples determined that they needed a plan to call out others to attend to the pressing need the Hellenists identified. Consequently, they and the community of believers called out seven "of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" for this delicate but necessary task (v. 3). In so doing, the twelve were free to continue their primary responsibilities of prayer and serving the word (v. 4).

In identifying and resolving a conflict in the early church, the apostles and the community of believers identified seven men with particular characteristics needed for the task. It was important for the Hellenist Christians to have confidence in these individuals.

Verse 5 identifies the men by name—Greek names—indicating that they represented the Hellenistic Jewish Christian community. Those who raised the issue became actively involved in solving the problem. Their selection further instilled confidence that the distribution to the widows would happen without discrimination.

After their selection, the apostles “prayed and laid their hands upon them” (v. 6), providing a formal symbol to their position in the church.

### **Acts 6:7**

“. . . the number of disciples multiplied greatly . . .” (v. 7).

Once the problem of discrimination had been carefully and thoughtfully solved, the conflict within the church was over, at least for the time. As a result, the church enjoyed growth, indicating what is still true today: people outside the faith are attracted by a spirit of harmony within the Christian community. Likewise, they are dissuaded by infighting and unresolved conflict. Perhaps more clearly than words or teachings, the way Christians handle conflict within the church validates for those outside the claims of our faith.

### **Courage Today**

Change can threaten churches and produce anxiety that results in discord and destruction. A dynamic, growing church will of necessity be courageous in living in the tension between change and conventionality. Self-definition is the key to a healthy church, and healthy churches are more likely to contribute to constructive, positive change.

The first-century church of Jerusalem lived in a climate of chaos yet found a sense of mission that guided them through the rough moments when the stress of change created conflict among them. Rather than ignore the problem, they acknowledged it. Church leaders did not try to become all things to all people. Instead, they empowered other gifted leaders and arrived at a positive, proactive solution.

The church of today is immersed in one of the greatest times of reformation of the modern era. The old wineskin of the past has

proven itself inadequate for the new wine of the needs of the future. Processing the changes necessary to reach a new generation requires that the church adapt itself to the culture and climate of change.

Leaders within the church must choose to either be guardians of the past and its false security or learn to live in the new world of change. They must embrace the need for change and navigate the chaos of conflict if they are to lead a dynamic church to do the work of God.

Ed Rowell, a teaching pastor and discipleship team leader in Franklin, Tennessee, offers this advice for leaders facing momentous change:

*Forget about achieving consensus.* True consensus is rare in any group, especially a local church. Waiting around for everyone to get on board may be a subconscious mechanism for avoiding the change altogether.

*Realize that we can't change an organization without changing ourselves.* Any significant change makes demands on us and requires more than we have to offer. God-given visions exceed all of our natural gifts, abilities, insights and even character.

*Remember that we either shape change or are shaped by it.* Nothing stays the same. We live in a dynamic world created by a dynamic God. We can be dynamic believers in a dynamic church if we are willing to follow the first-century church model.

*Know that change creates change.* One of the many benefits of a long-term ministry is the ability to create an environment where change is the rule, not the exception. Certainly it is possible to lead too far, too fast. But as one success builds on another, credibility escalates and the process and result of change loses its ability to instill fear.

*Understand that a change agent always lives in two worlds.* We must simultaneously be where our church is and where it is going.

*Affirm that people need to release the old before they can embrace the new.* Leaders usually tend to see the future more clearly and

can more easily release the old. They have a tendency to underestimate people's emotional attachment to buildings, traditions and methodologies. The church must utilize its pastoral care skills in leading the church through change.

The courageous church of the first century faced a dilemma of spirit among its members and found a way to meet the need through sensitivity and a healthy decision-making model that utilized the resources of the church to meet the need. As a result, *"the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly"* (Acts 6:7).

*Written by Keith D. Herron, senior pastor, Holmeswood Baptist Church, Kansas City, Missouri*

# Signs of the Courageous Church

## A Giving Church

### Acts 11:27-30

**Key Verses:** <sup>29</sup>And the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brethren who lived in Judea; <sup>30</sup>and they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

**Theme: A courageous church is a generous and giving church.**

### Introduction

The gospel story begins with the giving of a gift prompted by love (Jn 3:16), and, where Christianity most takes root, that practice of giving is its clearest evidence. Having freely received, the church freely gives to others who are in need. That's the way it is supposed to be.

Recent trends are not encouraging, however. While giving within congregations seems to be recovering to mid-1970s levels, benevolence giving hit an all-time low in 2000. According to a report from Empty Tomb, an Illinois-based research organization, church members' giving to benevolences (things like soup kitchens, seminaries and international missions) declined 39 percent between 1968 and 2000.

"People are concerned about keeping the lights on and the staff paid at their church, both of which are vital needs. But those activities ought to be the platform from which to reach out to a hurting world as Christians practice their religion," write the co-authors of the study, Sylvia and John Ronsvale. "Instead, congregation members appear to be emphasizing their own comfort over the needs of their local and international neighbors" (Banks 2002).

An individual's or church's attitude about money reveals a lot about the condition of their heart. Consider Ananais and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11), who conspired to defraud the church by giving only a portion of what they claimed to have given. They wanted the recognition and reputation of Barnabas (Acts 4:36-37) but without the personal sacrifice. The penalty was severe.

Or Simon, the famous magician of Samaria (Acts 8:9-24), who publicly embraced Christianity while still thinking that spiritual power was a commodity to be bought and sold.

Selfishness is never an attractive characteristic, and even less so when descriptive of Christians. Yet, we do tend to live for ourselves and our own comfort while we close our eyes to a world in need. It is this trait of our western Christian lifestyle perhaps more than any other that hurts our Christian witness.

What's the problem? Many Christians have not established a strong and sacrificial giving pattern.

Courageous churches, however, have discovered the joy of giving so that they can minister locally and around the world.

One such church was the assembly at Antioch. Founded out of the persecution that occurred in Jerusalem after the murder of Stephen (Acts 7:59-8:1), it serves as a great model for us. Barnabas, the encourager, was their pastor, and Saul/Paul was his able assistant (Acts 11:19-26). It was here that believers were for the first time referred to as Christians (Acts 11:26). Probably a derisive term as originally used, it meant "little Christs" and at least took note of the fact that these people were acting like their Lord.

Later, they would launch a great missionary effort (Acts 13:1). But they also are known for carefully balancing missions with ministry. When they became aware of a need, they responded immediately and generously from their hearts.

## **The Biblical Witness**

### **Acts 11:27-28**

Every week we receive letters or phone calls from individuals and worthy organizations needing our financial support. How do we know which to supply?

God is aware of all needs everywhere. Never caught by surprise or overwhelmed, God directs his people to respond.

Agabus, a prophet (Acts 21:10), was the instrument by which God spoke to the church at Antioch about a particular need requiring their help. Prophets were those Holy Spirit-inspired individuals who clearly spoke the word of God to people gathered in worship. Christians were now living in the messianic age where prophecy was expected (see Acts 2:12). These men and women (see 1 Cor 11:5) were listened to as forth-tellers and, on occasion, foretellers of God's truth. Their office was highly regarded in the early church (see 1 Cor 12:28; 14:29-30; Eph 4:11).

Agabus told of a famine coming during the reign of Emperor Claudius (A.D. 41-54), one so severe it would impact the entire Roman world. They understood "all the world" to be the inhabited world of the empire.

While there is little evidence of such a far-reaching natural and economic calamity, both Josephus and the Roman historian Tacitus do reference a series of poor harvests in Palestine. They record a severe famine there in AD 45-47.

The church in Antioch listened to Agabus' gripping tale and heard through his words the voice of God.

### **Acts 11:29**

These Christians felt a special kinship with the "mother church" in Jerusalem. They referred to the people there as "brothers," understanding that the church of Jesus Christ extends well past geographic or racial borders to all people everywhere who embrace the Savior. Though they had never met these people personally, they felt their suffering as keenly as if it were their own (1 Cor 12:26).

The Jerusalem church was, according to theologian F.F. Bruce, "chronically poor." This may have been because, as a minority group within the population of that city, they were victims of an economic boycott.

Early on they had pooled all of their resources in order to help one another in need (Acts 2:44; 3:6; 4:32), but by now practically

everybody was in that position. The government provided no social safety net, so any emergency aid would have to come from those who shared a common faith. Yes, they were their brother's keepers.

Cecil Osborne, in his book *The Art of Becoming a Whole Person*, defines *church* as a “gathering place for all who are hurting and want relief and all who are compassionate and want to help” (Osborne 1978).

### **Acts 11:30**

“And they did so.” What a brief but important sentence! The church in Antioch received a revelation from God about the impending famine (they heard something), they responded with compassion (they felt something) and then they carried out the relief effort (they did something).

Many sincere Christians are touched by an emotional appeal. They resolve then and there to do something about it one day soon. But time slips by and the motivation dissipates. Nothing is done. The Christians at Antioch, however, had more than just good intentions. They put works to their faith (see Jas 2:26) right away.

The church determined to send aid to those living in Judea, but this would not be prescribed or coerced. Each Christian determined his or her role in the effort.

The standard, beginning point of responsible stewardship according to the Bible is the tithe. Hebrew Scripture established the principle of tithing even before the law was given (see Gen 14:20). Later it was called a “holy” thing (Lev 27:30) and the people were warned not to “rob God” by withholding it from the storehouse (Mal 3:8-10). Jesus encouraged the practice (Mt 23:23) as something his followers ought to do.

Giving for the Christian is not a matter of legalistic obligation, however, but an expression of gratitude to God for all he has given. These were “disciples,” close followers of Jesus, so they followed his lead and gave from their hearts. Like the Macedonian Christians Paul wrote about in 2 Corinthians 8:4, they looked upon giving in this situation as a privilege. They deliberately chose to discomfort themselves by sharing their resources with those who needed their help.

Each disciple gave something different. Not equal amounts, for obviously some had more disposable income than others. Yet each contributed sacrificially. Again, as in Macedonia, some were perhaps very poor themselves yet they, too, gave—“according to their means . . . and beyond their means, of their own free will” (2 Cor 8:3).

The Christians at Antioch put their offerings into the trustworthy hands of Barnabas and Saul. They went to Jerusalem on behalf of the church and presented their offering to the elders of the suffering congregation.

God’s resources deserve the proper channels and the best, most cost-effective practices. Confusion over 9/11 contributions and scandals involving the United Way and other charities remind us that money given emotionally to emergency situations can be easily misappropriated or lost in bureaucratic confusion. Churches should be scrupulous in appeals, the handling of funds and to-the-penny accounting.

Paul and Barnabas were the delivery system, but the elders in Jerusalem were the distribution system. No one individual or group could do it all. Those closest to the situation were entrusted with the funds so that the most legitimate needs could be met in a timely manner.

### **Courage Today**

Charles Johnson, pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in San Antonio, Texas, tells the story of Herman Ostery, a Nebraska farmer who needed to relocate his barn. The new location was only 110 feet away from the current site, but he would have to tear the barn down and rebuild it—a difficult and costly task. Herman’s neighbors heard about his situation and came to his rescue. (I like to think they were his church friends, too.) They had a plan. They would pick up his barn and move the entire structure to the new site. They used hydraulic jacks to get the barn off the ground and then all 328 of them literally picked it up and walked it 110 feet to the freshly-cleared spot. Herman later calculated that each person lifted and carried approximately 50 pounds.

Clearly, when we work together selflessly and pool our energies and resources, we can accomplish more than we can on our own.

The principle applies in families, businesses, communities, schools, organizations, churches—anywhere people commit to a common goal. This is especially true where financial resources are concerned.

Generous churches begin with generous individuals. They capture the imagination of their communities and inspire others around them to open their hearts and pocketbooks as well. Selfless giving always motivates and blesses, while stinginess discourages and even calls into question the sincerity of a people's faith.

Individuals through their churches can make a big difference when they follow the example of the church at Antioch and act together in specific ministry situations. When the entire congregation hears of a crisis or need, God can speak clearly about what they should do in response. Then each person can do his or her part. "Not reluctantly or under compulsion," Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 9:7, "for God loves a cheerful (happy) giver."

In 1986, Mount Hermon Baptist Church, Danville, Virginia, was stymied by a pending decision. Their bank held money in a building fund, but they could not agree on what to build or when to start. Would it be a fellowship hall, additional Sunday school classes or, as the youth wanted, a Family Life Center?

In a message to that church, Keith Parks, then president of the Foreign Mission Board, mentioned the need for a conference/training Center in Togo, Africa. In that casual mention, God spoke a clear message to his people. Their pastor at the time, along with the deacons and trustees, went to the church in business session and recommended that the church give one-half of its building fund (\$35,000) to help build that center. The people were in complete agreement and sent the gift.

When a church and individual Christians look beyond themselves and give boldly in response to the prompting of God's Spirit, a new day of blessing begins.

*Written by Don Davidson, pastor, Mount Hermon Baptist Church, Danville, Virginia*

# Signs of the Courageous Church

## A Resilient Church

### Acts 15:1-35

**Key Verse:** <sup>12</sup>And all the assembly kept silence; and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

**Theme:** A courageous church is a resilient church.

### Introduction

Freeways collapsed, while a landmark bent but didn't break. Nature's power overwhelmed the strong but could not undermine the resilient.

It happened during one of those "Where were you when ... ?" moments. You probably remember October 17, 1989, if not for the date alone, then for what happened that evening. Millions of Americans had just settled in front of their TV sets to watch the San Francisco Giants take on the Oakland A's in the World Series. Right in the middle of the pre-game program glib broadcasters turned mute for a moment. An earthquake shook San Francisco's Candlestick Park. Before the dust settled, literally, baseball didn't seem very important.

Riveting images of survival and loss, hope and despair replaced anticipated scenes of home runs, double plays and baseball victory. Who can forget Bay Area freeways—jammed with cars and trucks—"pancaked" to smithereens? What about live video of entire city blocks ablaze, fueled by ruptured gas lines? Just in time, when viewers could take no more, a camera would pan away to the Transamerica Pyramid, sky-scraping icon of a strong and vital San Francisco. There it stood, magnificent in crimson dawn and golden sunset.

Almost before you could say, “7.1 on the Richter scale,” the networks began parading panels of experts. Engineers, architects and seismologists talked about the physics of earthquakes. They explained why structures like freeways and historic buildings fell while new office towers, hotels and that Transamerica skyscraper still stood.

The difference was resilience. No matter how apparently sturdy, the merely strong structures could not withstand the force of a major earthquake. But years of research and experimentation taught engineers and architects to construct resilient buildings, strong enough to withstand a shock but also flexible so they can move a little under stress. Flexibility is the key; they bend so they won't break.

The principle of resilience also applies to people. You know “brittle” folks. He's high-strung and temperamental, rigid about the way he wants life to be. She's self-absorbed and set in her ways, unable to cope with new circumstances. When the “storms of life” beat against someone like this, bad things happen. Resilient people, on the other hand, are courageous and optimistic. They understand change is constant. And while they live according to strong principles, they're flexible enough to understand how to adapt to the changing dynamics around them and courageous enough to proceed.

Churches can be—should be—resilient, too. Throughout 2,000 years, some Christians have tried to encase their churches in restrictive molds of tradition, legalism, provincialism, racism, sexism. Their mantra is, “We've never done it that way before.” Without flexibility inspired by vision and creativity, they calcify—immobilized by fear of challenge and change. And then, they fracture and splinter when these fears materialize.

## **The Biblical Witness**

### **Acts 10-14**

Fortunately, the Bible presents a wonderful model of how a courageous church confronts changing, challenging circumstances with resilience, or principled flexibility.

The Book of Acts describes the growth of the church in the decades after Jesus' ministry on Earth. The gospel advanced steadily, but a byproduct of that advance introduced dissension into the church. The good news leaped the walls of Judaism; Gentiles began to accept Jesus Christ as their Savior.

The first clash occurred after God gave visions to Cornelius, a Roman military officer, and to Peter. These companion visions led Peter to share the gospel with Cornelius and his household, who heard, believed and followed Christ (Acts 10). Soon, some Jewish Christians chastised Peter for preaching to “uncircumcised men”—non-Jews. But Peter retold his story and defended himself by asking, “Who was I that I could withstand God?” (Acts 11:17).

That didn't settle the matter, however. Even as Jews refused to believe Jesus was the Messiah (Acts 13), Gentiles in Antioch, Cyprus and Galatia heard the gospel and believed (Acts 11-15). This grated the nerves of some Jewish Christians, who could not comprehend that Gentiles could become Christians without first becoming Jews.

The issue reached a crisis point in Syrian Antioch when some visiting Jewish Christians insisted Gentiles must be “circumcised according to the custom of Moses”—become Jews—in order to become Christians. This led to an argument with Paul and Barnabas, the missionaries who had led the new Christians in faith. Both parties agreed to take the question before the mother church in Jerusalem for mediation.

### **Acts 15:1-35**

Looking back through the centuries, we cannot overstate the importance of this meeting, called the Jerusalem Council. The future of Christianity was at stake. If the Judaizers, those who said a person had to be a Jew to be a Christian, prevailed, Christianity likely would have remained a small Jewish sect. Instead, the early church determined the gospel is good news for all people, opening Christianity to the whole world. The Jerusalem Council provided a pattern for problem-solving that produced a resilient, courageous solution:

- They thoroughly discussed the issue. We know “there had been much debate” (v. 7). They apparently presented and considered all points of view.
- They received counsel from a mature, trusted Christian who had dealt with the issue before. No one among them could have had better credentials for faithfulness than Peter. He insisted even the Jews could not live up to the Law, so why should Gentiles be expected to do so? Rather, all are saved through grace (vv. 7-11).
- They heard testimony from believers directly involved in the situation. Paul and Barnabas reported on how God had blessed their missionary efforts with Gentiles (v. 12).
- They turned to Scripture. James, leader of the church in Jerusalem, quoted from the Book of Amos, prophecy that foretold the salvation of Gentiles (vv. 16-18).
- They agreed to a compromise that expanded God’s kingdom and affirmed the essential elements of faith; it welcomed Gentiles into Christ’s church, for salvation comes by faith, not law. It allowed latitude on non-essentials; while the compromise did not require Gentiles to be circumcised, it did not instruct Jewish Christians to abandon the practice. And, it advised all believers to adhere to practices that would promote fellowship; the restrictions placed on Gentiles (“abstain from the pollutions of idols and from unchastity and from what is strangled and from blood”) prevented them from making themselves ceremonially unclean and thus creating a problem of close relationship with Jewish Christians (vv. 20-30).

The early church demonstrated resiliency. They drew upon the strength of the truth revealed to them through the power of the Holy Spirit—the gospel offers salvation to all people. Then they proceeded with flexibility to shape their practices to offer love, care and concern for the whole community of faith. This passage ends with rejoicing in Antioch (15:31) and the expansion of the church to new believers (15:35).

### **Resilience: Bend but Don’t Break**

Thank God, resilience didn’t die with the early church. Throughout the centuries, wise Christians have applied the principle of resilience—draw strength from the essentials of the faith, bend on

matters of interpretation or preference—to help them encounter conflict, challenge and change. The wisdom of resilience has infused them with the courage not only to persevere, but also to thrive.

Resilience has enabled the church to process conflict redemptively like the “circumcision solution” in Jerusalem.

As a young evangelist, Billy Graham encountered conflict when he began cooperating with churches affiliated with the National and World Council of Churches in order to minister in cities and reach souls around the globe.

Baptist fundamentalist Bob Jones derided the evangelist for practicing a “discount type of religion” and for “sacrificing the cause of evangelism on the altar of temporary convenience.” Graham remained passionate about leading people to faith in Christ, but he told detractors he would go anywhere to preach the gospel of Christ to anyone. He insisted love—not orthodoxy—is the one badge of Christianity (Martin 2000).

Sometimes, resilience means standing for the spiritual and physical needs of “the least of these,” even when criticism rains down from Christian brothers and sisters.

And can Christian brothers and sisters ever criticize. Just ask victims of the “worship wars.” No topic in decades has generated as much conflict in churches as the selection of music for worship. Some worshippers believe Bach and Beethoven received divine plenary inspiration. Others think Jesus and the apostles sang songs written by Fanny Crosby and B.B. McKinney. And still others feel anything written before, oh, last month is outdated and never will appeal to young non-Christians.

That’s not a huge exaggeration. Brittle churches have split over worship music. Rigid Christians have left churches in a huff when they could not sing their favorite songs.

Thankfully, hundreds of surviving churches have applied the resilience principles that guided the Jerusalem Council. They have listened patiently, considered the needs of everyone and sought God’s plan. The solutions have been as unique as the

congregations themselves—separate services for varying tastes; blended services that combine something for everyone; entirely new congregations targeted to specific groups; renewed respectful appreciation for the vibrancy of worship, however it is expressed.

Sometimes, resilience means seeking the “best” for the whole church while mutually nurturing one another’s needs.

In addition, resilience enables churches to overcome obstacles that would fracture rigid congregations.

### **Courage Today**

Flames destroyed the lovely auditorium of a strong city church. Soon, stress forced the pastor to resign. The church rebuilt and called another pastor, but things just weren’t the same. Attendance declined. Glory days seemed like faint memories.

But the core membership remained resilient. They learned to stand on the unchangeables—love for Christ and commitment to their community. They also realized they had to adapt to their changing circumstances. They respected the pain inflicted on members because of the fire and the staff changes. Yet they also welcomed newcomers who were not encumbered by the “baggage” of the past. They learned to worship again. They re-dreamed a vision for ministry in their neighborhood and city. They chose not to fear the unknown, and today they are rejuvenated.

Sometimes, resilience means accepting pain and disappointment, then looking ahead to possibilities with determination.

Drought threatened a county-seat church in a small farming community. This wasn’t the first time for the church, but the situation was new to the pastor. The church’s challenge came up for discussion during a deacons’ meeting. Crops had failed, and church families faced the prospect of another year with no income. Even if every member tithed, that could mean little or no income for the church.

Then the deacons started discussing how they would tithe the money they took on loan from the bank. “You mean you folks intend to tithe on your loans?” the pastor asked incredulously. “Preacher,”

one longtime deacon replied, “if we didn’t tithe our loans, this ol’ church would have dried up years ago.”

Sometimes, resilience means staring down a challenge, trusting God and depending on the Holy Spirit for divine creativity.

Resilience reflects strength and flexibility. Neither is sufficient alone, but God blesses their synergy with courage that produces hope.

*Written by Marv Knox, editor of the Baptist Standard, weekly newspaper of the Baptist General Convention of Texas*