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# COMPELLING CHRISTIANITY

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*Compelling Christianity*

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## THE GROWTH OF THE CHURCH



*And Saul was consenting unto his [Stephen's] death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles. And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison. Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word. Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them.*

—Acts 8:1-5

I want in particular to emphasize the fourth verse of this passage: “Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word.” Indeed, I am concerned to deal only with the first half even of that verse: “Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where . . .”

We are considering [in this series] the early chapters in the book of the Acts of the Apostles. We have been looking at these chapters for a very definite reason. It is because we are given here an account of the early church; we are told how the church came into being and what happened to it in the early days. Our object in considering Acts is very practical. It is not merely that we are historians and history is very interesting. We are concerned about the extraordinary ignorance in the modern world—an ignorance that is incredible when you first consider it—as to what the Christian church is, what her message is, what she is meant to do, and what she really is about.

There is not only ignorance, but there is also terrible confusion at the present time, and this, of course, is the great tragedy because the contention of those of us who are Christians is that we have here the only message that can be of any benefit to any individual or group of individuals. And yet the very church that is supposed to be the guardian and custodian of the mysteries contained in the Bible is herself partly the cause of this terrible and tragic confusion. I am concerned, therefore, about the masses of people who are outside the Christian church and who say quite frankly that they are not interested in Christianity. I believe that their position is what it is because of this confusion with regard to the primary and fundamental truth concerning what the Christian church really is and what her message is.

Now this ignorance and confusion, of course, takes many different forms. It is one of my basic contentions that most people who are not Christians are in that position because their initial approach has been wrong. Of course, they say it is not that, and they bring up particular difficulties. But those are never the real source of the trouble. The real trouble is a fundamentally wrong approach, and if that approach is wrong, you are inevitably doomed to go wrong all along the line.

It is simple: if you start on the wrong road, you are bound to arrive at the wrong destination, and that, I suggest to you, is what is happening to so many. It increasingly seems to me that people are in trouble because they spend their time discussing the implications or the applications of Christianity without first deciding what Christianity is—and you can waste an awful lot of time doing that. The books and the articles and the discussions are quite pathetic. The real trouble between the contestants is that they do not know the first principles. It is on the fundamentals that they have gone wrong. All this other argumentation is entirely beside the point.

There are two main causes for this fundamental failure in the whole approach to Christianity. The first is that it is regarded as just a teaching. People may say it is right or they may say it is wrong, but the point is that they approach it as just one of a number of possible teachings that are put before us. Here we are in this troubled world, and never has it been in greater trouble. We have already had two world wars in this [twentieth] century, and only God knows what is awaiting us. So some people say, "I've considered politics, and I've considered philosophy, and now here's a message that seems to address the world." But they think of it as just another possible answer to the questions, an alternative solution to some of the problems. They think that the main message of the Christian church and the Christian faith is merely a point of view to consider.

I must go on repeating this because this is what is being said. People talk about a Christian point of view on the war in Vietnam. Church dignitaries are always ready to give their opinions about this, both as individuals and in their conferences. A man who is not an evangelical has written a most important book in which he says about such people, "On what authority are they speaking? Where do they get their ideas from? How are they able to give these opinions?" And this is serious because people think that these dignitaries are putting forward the Christian message when they are just giving their point of view with regard to the questions that are agitating the minds of people today.

Now church leaders are beginning to say quite openly that theology must be reconstructed altogether and that we must start with the world as it is. Nothing, of course, could be further removed from the New Testament position, but that is what they are saying. So people do not think of Christianity as something vital and essential to all of us, but only as a possible point of view, a possible attitude that we may take regarding these pressing problems that are troubling our modern world.

The second underlying cause for the wrong approach to Christianity is quite different. It is that people's approach is entirely personal. I am thinking of the large group of people who are not interested in the war in Vietnam, for example. Someone from this group will say, "I'm not a politician. I'm not interested in such things. Of course, it affects me, but that's not my big concern." These people are not primarily concerned about the problem of apartheid and issues like that. What they are interested in is their own personal problems. They are conscious of certain weaknesses, certain failures, certain needs, and they are unhappy. This could be because of the treachery of some trusted friend or some disappointment in life or some besetting sin that ever gets them down. Whatever the cause, and there are many, they are troubled. So political questions do not occupy the center of their minds at all. They are concerned about themselves and want some relief and release.

Those in this second group approach the Christian faith along the line of their particular need, and it is offered to them as something that will help them deal with their pressing personal problems—Jesus as your Friend, Jesus as the one who will heal you of that disease, Jesus as the one who will meet you at the point of your failure. He will give you peace, He will give you rest and quiet, and so on. This is their approach, and unfortunately at the end they are often left exactly as they were at the beginning.

Now all this is important because both these approaches allow other people to say, "Well, if that's the point of Christianity, I'm not interested. It

doesn't concern me." With regard to the first group, someone will say, "I'm a politician, and I don't have much use for these idealists who are always calling on us to sit on the streets in protest or to march or to go out to Vietnam and sit between the two armies. That's just a lot of nonsense. If people like to do that sort of thing, well, let them, but it's not for me." So the whole of Christianity is dismissed. Indeed, it may be regarded as dangerous on the grounds that it makes people think sentimentally and foolishly and does not allow them to face facts with realism or with courage.

And there is exactly the same reaction in the second group. Someone says, "I don't have the needs these people are talking about. I know they crowd the waiting rooms of the consultants and psychiatrists in the clinics and hospitals that deal with such problems. The world is full of this sort of thing. People are taking drugs and turning to drink, and others go to psychiatrists. But I don't have these psychiatric problems. These people can't adjust to life. They've tried all the cults and haven't found satisfaction, so now they're coming to try Christianity. But as for me, I'm not interested."

Now it is of fundamental importance to understand that Christianity is not a mere teaching or point of view, and it is not merely something that helps us deal with our problems. Thank God, it is these two things. It is a point of view, a teaching, and it does deal with our individual problems, but it is a fallacy to start with that. And that is why so many are not Christians at the present time—they have an entirely false idea of the Christian faith and the Christian message. And it is because this passage deals with this that I am calling your attention to it.

"How does this passage deal with these two wrong approaches?" asks someone.

Let me put it to you as a principle. My first proposition is that Christian faith and teaching are the result of historical events and facts and actions. That is what we are reminded of in this passage. The book we are studying is called the book of Acts; it is the book of the Acts of the Apostles. Or as the writer himself might prefer to put it, it is the book of the Acts of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is how he begins: "The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach . . ." The writer of this book of Acts is undoubtedly Luke, the man who wrote the Gospel According to Luke, and he writes his second book, like the first, to Theophilus. He says that in the first book he told Theophilus about the things that Jesus began to do and teach "until the day in which he was taken up, after that he through the Holy Ghost had given commandments unto the apostles whom he had chosen." Luke is saying, "Having told you that, I am

now going on to tell you of the things He continued to do.” So some people say that this book is not so much the book of the Acts of the Apostles, although they were the actual actors, but rather the book of the Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ who was acting through the apostles. Others say that we should call this book the book of the Acts of the Holy Spirit.

The important thing to remember, however, is that everywhere we are given facts. Facts! Events! We are studying things that happened on the field of history. All that we are considering here belongs as solidly to history as does the conquest of Britain by Julius Caesar or various other events that are recorded in the pages of secular textbooks.

Now I want to show you the relevance of this. I want to show you that it is fatal to start with ourselves or to start with the world. One man says, “I’m very concerned about these things that are happening in our world today.” We can say to him, “Before you start looking at what is happening in the world, consider these events that happened two thousand years ago.” Another man says, “I’m very concerned about my own troubles.” We can say, “My friend, forget your troubles for a moment, and face these facts that took place nearly two thousand years ago.” That is how the Bible starts, and for that reason it is different from every other teaching. It is a book that primarily calls us to consider certain facts.

What is the Christian church? Well, the Christian church is not an institution that has been founded by people. Men and women have founded many institutions and societies. There are many learned societies in London. A number of men and women holding similar views come together and decide to form a society, and they become incorporated and so on. That is the way the world does things, but the Christian church did not come into being in that way, and this book, the Bible, tells us all about it.

Here is a society of people that came into being entirely and solely as the result of certain things that happened in this world. The church is entirely historical, and if you take away the history, not only will you never understand the church, there would never have been a church. Whatever your experience may be, whatever your condition at this moment, for the time being it is, I say, absolutely irrelevant. Some of you may have terrible problems, and others may be saying, “Isn’t life wonderful! I don’t have a problem in the world!” Either way I have a message to hold before you that is as relevant and urgent to you as it is to everyone else.

I repeat that this is absolutely fundamental. This message asks us all, first and foremost, to consider these facts, these happenings. It is a proclamation based upon events—it is a book of *acts*! What are they? Well, the great mes-

sage that was preached by these early preachers, the early apostles, was a message concerning Jesus of Nazareth. There were problems in that ancient world, even as there are today. The Jews had been conquered by the Romans, and no nation, especially a proud nation, likes to be conquered. But they were being governed by Rome, and they did not like it. Yet when the apostles went around preaching, they did not deal with the political and social conditions—they did not even mention them. They preached about Jesus.

Now those of us who have been working through the first seven chapters of Acts together know this perfectly well. There is never any mention in Scripture of the Roman tyranny or the Roman bondage. No political issues are ever mentioned at all. The whole message is about Jesus. The four Gospels are devoted to Him, and if you read this book of Acts, you will find that they are still talking about Him, this extraordinary person who lived in Galilee and, having been a carpenter for many years, suddenly, at the age of thirty, burst upon the nation and spoke in a most astounding manner. Not only that, He also did the most amazing things: He worked miracles, stopped a storm on a lake, raised the dead, and gave sight to the blind. Jesus was a phenomenon, a fact of history. This is what they were talking about.

And they talked about His death; they made a great deal of that—how He was nailed to a tree and died, and how His body was taken down and was laid in a tomb, and how they had all seen it. They told how a stone was rolled before the face of that tomb and then sealed and guarded by soldiers. But—and this was the whole point—He had risen from the dead. In spite of all these precautions the tomb was empty. And He had appeared to them, and they had become witnesses of the fact that He had risen from the dead, in the body. This was their message—Jesus and the resurrection.

Now you need not take my word for this—it is all here. This is history. This is what they talked about. The apostles did not turn to people and say, “Are you having trouble sleeping? Are you worried about that disease? Do you want a friend? Are you feeling lonely? Or what about this position in which we find ourselves as a nation? Don’t you think it’s about time we protested against this and that?” Nothing of the sort! It was all about Jesus and the resurrection!

And then, of course, on top of that, as we are told in the second chapter of Acts, there was the extraordinary event that took place in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. These men were ordinary men—fishermen, most of them—not men of culture, not men of learning, not men whom the world regarded as great. They were dismissed by the authorities as “unlearned and ignorant men” (Acts 4:13). But something happened to these men on the Day

of Pentecost. They were absolutely transformed and transfigured. They were filled with joy and brightness. Their faces were shining, and they were able to speak in languages they had never known before, so that everybody could hear them speaking in their own language and dialect. What a phenomenon!

That is how the church began. That is the record we are given here. The crowd came and listened. And one of these men, a fisherman whose name was Peter, stood up and preached with such amazing authority and power that his sermon was interrupted not by opposition but by people in trouble about themselves and their souls, who cried out in agony of soul saying, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). And Peter gave them this message: “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost” (v. 38). So they did, and three thousand people were added to the church that day.

We have been considering together the other events that followed that great sermon by Peter. But this is what is interesting: until the eighth chapter of Acts, all these events were confined to the city of Jerusalem. But at the beginning of this eighth chapter we come to a new departure. We see the Christian church beginning to spread abroad, throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. And we know that subsequently, as we see in later chapters of Acts, it began to spread even farther, throughout the then civilized world. It went to Greece, to Rome, to Spain. All those countries around that Mediterranean seaboard began not only to hear but also to receive this message, and the Christian church quite soon had her people, her citizens, in all these countries. And we know that today it has spread throughout all the countries of the entire world. This is the beginning of all that, and I remind you again that we are dealing here with something that is historical—we are dealing with the sheer facts of history.

I wonder how often you have considered the whole question of Christianity in this way and in these terms. Are you surprised that I am saying all this? You might say, “What’s the relevance of all that to me?” My friend, I will show you the relevance. The mistake you make is to ask that question at this point. You are still thinking about yourself, are you not? Or you are thinking about war or the problems that are interesting to you. But that is wrong. Leave them alone for a moment. This is what you must consider: these events happened.

Now what is the significance of these words in Acts 8:1 that the believers were “scattered abroad”? I will make two immediate observations. The first is that Christianity is patently not just a Jewish religion; it is not just a local religion. The religions of the world are generally local religions.

Confucianism, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism are basically local religions. But Christianity has claimed from the beginning that it is the one universal faith. “There is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved,” said the apostle Peter to the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:12). Jesus Himself said, “I am the light of the world” (John 9:5). He said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:6). Christianity is exclusive but universal at the same time. Jesus Christ came for the whole world of men and women; He is the Savior of the world.

Here, of course, we are confronted by an extraordinary fact. It is the fact that the Christian faith started in a very little country—Palestine. What a small country it was, and what a comparatively unimportant country at that particular time! And here was a man who was a carpenter. Yet they asked this question about Him: “How knoweth this man letters, having never learned?” (John 7:15). He had never been to the schools; He had never attended the lectures of the great philosophers in the academies and porches of Greece; He was not even a Pharisee. He was unlettered, untutored! Jesus was a Galilean peasant, and yet He was the one out of whom Christianity came—this little country, this kind of person. And then there were these men who carried on after Jesus had gone. They had nothing to commend them; judged by human standards they were absolutely hopeless. These were not the people who form royal societies or great academies and institutions of culture and learning. No, the exact opposite. And yet the simple fact is that this message has spread throughout the whole world. And here in Acts, I repeat, is the beginning of that.

But I make a second observation, and this again is a sheer fact of history. Whatever you may think of Christianity, you have to grant this—it has been the most potent factor in world history. There is no doubt about this. Fairly soon—you will find it later on in Acts—people began to describe the apostles as “these that have turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6). And Christianity has, of course, done just that. Let us for a moment forget everything but just this fact of history, this phenomenon by which we are confronted. It is a fact that by about A.D. 325 the beliefs of this little group of people had become the official religion of the great Roman Empire. How do you explain the history of the world? My contention is that the really big movements in history are only explicable in terms of the history of the Christian church.

This is the way to approach Christianity. Forget all your personal problems, forget your views on any other general question—just begin to consider this fact, this great phenomenon. Read your secular history books and see the

place that has been occupied, the part that has been played, by this Christian message. What was it that saved a modicum of culture when the Goths and the Vandals and other rude hordes sacked imperial Rome? It was this Christian church that preserved the little culture that was left, and preserved it for centuries to come.

Whether or not you are a Christian, you have to agree that the Protestant Reformation was one of the great turning points in history. Nothing has been the same since. And that came out of this message. What happened to Martin Luther was that he began to understand the teaching of the New Testament. It had been hidden from him, as it had been from most people, by the falsity of Roman Catholic doctrine. But that man was suddenly enlightened and saw what it all meant. He turned, and he turned the world also, as it were. Look at the impact of Protestantism, not only upon literature and art and music, but also upon political issues. Secular historians are prepared to agree that the whole idea of democracy and liberty came directly out of the Protestant Reformation.

Now this is a fact, a phenomenon of history, and I could elaborate at great length—I have often done so! England's Poor Law system came out of the Christian church. When nobody else was thinking about help for the poor and suffering, the church practiced it. Hospitals came from Christianity—Rahere, who founded St Bartholomew's Hospital, the oldest hospital in Britain, was a monk—and so have all the greatest and most beneficent movements. Take education—you young people who are enjoying the benefits of education today, have you ever stopped to ask how it has come to you, why education is no longer the prerogative of a chosen few but has become so free? You will find your answer not only in the Protestant Reformation but also in the further work of the Puritans and still more in the Methodist revival and reawakening several hundred years ago and all that it led to in the nineteenth century. You cannot understand your modern position apart from the Christian church. History is not explicable apart from it.

So forget your personal problems, forget your aches and pains in a spiritual sense, forget all your ideas about the condition of the world today. I ask you just to stop and consider and ask, what is this message? What is this teaching that began to spread at this point in Acts and has had such an effect upon the whole story of the human race? And, I repeat, these five verses that we are considering give us the answer.

In response, then, to the two wrong approaches to Christianity, my first principle is that it is founded upon actual historical events, events that changed the world. So I come now to my second principle, which is that the

meaning and significance of these events can only be understood in terms of a great spiritual conflict. That is what I find here in these five verses, as I have already found it in the previous chapter, in the account of the persecution and the death of that first Christian martyr, Stephen. In chapter 7 we read how Stephen was defending himself before the great court, the Sanhedrin, and this is what we are told:

*When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth. But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, and said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God. Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, and cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul. And they stoned Stephen, [as he was] calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles. . . . As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison. Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word. Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria.*

—Acts 7:54–8:1, 3-5

What is the explanation of this persecution? The Gospel spread because of it, but why did it occur? This is a vital question. Does it not astonish you to read that people were treated in this way? Why was it so? This kind of thing does not happen to teachers of philosophy. Oh, I know the philosophers can vilify one another with ink on paper; they can be very sarcastic as they go after one another. Yes, but that is a little bit of playacting. Here is something real. This is men and women being stoned to death, dragged out of their houses, thrown into prison, thrown to the lions in the arena—terrible persecutions.

So why does persecution happen to this message and to these people?

Here is something we must consider. Why the violence? Why the bitterness? Now if you really want to deal with your own personal problems and the problem of Vietnam [or current wars] and the whole problem of the world today, this is the way to do it. The question is not what we can do about Vietnam but why we ever get a Vietnam. Why is there such a thing as war? Why do people behave in this manner? Why is there heartbreak? Why is there adultery and divorce and separation and little children with broken hearts—why all this? Those are the questions. Before you begin to talk about what to do, find out the cause, and here we are given the only answer. Let me show it to you in its context.

What happened to these early Christians, of course, was nothing but a repetition of what had happened to the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. This is what you must face if you want to understand life and want to understand yourself. Look at the Gospels: here was the very Son of God standing among men and women. He had left the glory of heaven and had come to earth. He had humbled Himself. He had taken the form of a servant. Why did He do it? Did He come to do harm? Did He come to create trouble? Did He come to make life impossible for us with the standard He set in the Sermon on the Mount? Why did He come into the world?

You know the answer. He went about doing good. Never has anyone done so much good in this world in speech and in action. He was the friend of tax-collectors and sinners. He healed the sick and the afflicted. He brought peace and happiness and joy. He said, “The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). He said, “I have come to help you. I have come to redeem you. I have come to tell you about God. I have come to put you into relationship with God.”

But how did they treat the Son of God? You know the story, do you not? If not, it is about time you did. Here is the history with which you must become familiar. Here is the history you must understand. You cannot understand what is happening in your modern world until you understand this history. Here is the key to it all. Why did the world deal with Him as it did? Why the opposition? Why the hatred? Why the bitterness? Why did they try to stone Him? Why did they lie about Him? He never did anybody any harm—He did nothing but good. Yet the leaders and the people finally shouted out, “Away with Him! Crucify Him!” And they did: they killed Him. Why did they do it?

And when you come to this book of Acts, you find the same treatment given out to these followers of His. Peter and John healed a lame man at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, a man over forty years of age who had never

walked in his life. Everybody had tried to do everything they could, but nobody could help him. Then Peter said, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk" (Acts 3:6). And he did. For that they were arrested, thrown into prison, put on trial, and treated abominably. But they went on doing things like that, and the authorities went on putting them in prison.

And then you come to the great story of Stephen, a man filled with the Holy Spirit. What had Stephen done? He had done no harm. Again here was a man who was preaching good news, showing people a way of salvation, doing good. Yet he was stoned to death, and "they gnashed on him with their teeth" (Acts 7:54). What was the matter with them?

Then look at this man Saul of Tarsus. We know that Saul was an outstanding genius, that he was capable of deep emotion. We learn all this as we read his later epistles. He was not suddenly given brains when he was converted; he had always been a profound thinker, always a man of deep feeling. Yet here he was, making havoc of the church, dragging men and women out of their houses and throwing them into prison. Why did he do this kind of thing?

And why has such persecution continued throughout the centuries? Why have people always thought it clever to denounce Christianity and persecute Christians? Why do they still do it? Why is this message being treated as it is in the modern world? You remember what Hitler did; you know what Communism is still doing in many countries. Why the bitterness? Why the spite? Why the vituperation? Why the readiness to kill Christians?

Now we have evidence for saying that even Stalin, in the last war [World War II], had to admit that the best workers he could find in his munitions factories in Russia were the Christians whom he despised and reviled. He confessed that they were the best people in the country, the most reliable, the most dependable, and he relaxed his laws against them. Yet the persecution came back. How do you explain this?

Of course, opposition is not confined to governments and systems; you also find it among individuals. You see bitter hatred; you hear people saying about their own children, "I would sooner see them dead than become Christians." These are able people; in other respects they appear to be rational. They are people of education and culture and understanding. Yet they ostracize their own children, have nothing to do with them, and vilify them because they have become Christians. Why is this?

There is only one answer. This persecution is but a manifestation of a tremendous spiritual conflict. This is the great message of the Bible. You find

it beginning back in the third chapter of the book of Genesis. When Adam rebelled and sinned against God and fell, God came down and in effect said, “As the result of this sin, there will be war perpetually between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman.” That is what the apostle Paul says in the sixth chapter of his epistle to the Ephesians: “We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high [heavenly] places” (6:12). That is the only explanation. We are not dealing with mere men and women; there is something behind them. A man like Saul did not persecute Christians by instinct or by nature. He was in the hands of another power; he was being driven.

So the only explanation both of this persecution recorded here in Acts and also of the state of the world today is that there is this mighty warfare between God and the devil, a war for the souls of men and women. This world is under the dominion of an alien power, the power of the devil, the power of hell. There are evil spirits, sorcerers, evil forces and powers. The world, of course, is too clever to believe in this, is it not? And that is exactly where it is fooled. It behaves as it does because it is under the power of these evil forces, but it does not know it, and it does not understand. People in and of themselves do not behave in such an utterly irrational manner or become mad against the beneficent message of the Gospel. No, they are the victims, they are the tools, they are the dupes, the instruments, of this power of evil that hates God and does its utmost to ruin His universe. Unseen spiritual forces are manipulating men and women. This is the essential message.

It is a spiritual battle—that is the only adequate explanation. The physical battle, the material battle, is only a manifestation of the real battle that goes on in the realm of the spirit, working in us without our conscious awareness, making us act in this extraordinary manner. Look at this man Saul—he, of all men, behaving like this!

But, thank God, I do not and I must not stop at that. I must bring you to my third and last principle, which is this: the events that we have recorded here are, in terms of the Gospel, simply an account of the outworking of God’s plan and God’s way of conquering these enemies and giving salvation to men and women. Let me put it like this—I am only giving you a general message now, but it is the message of the whole Bible—the world is as it is because it has listened to the devil. Adam listened and fell; everybody following him has done the same thing. All your troubles today are due to this and to nothing else. You can educate yourself or others—it does not make any difference. You can improve the way in which society is ordered—it does

not make any difference. People will drink and gamble and indulge in sex and perversions exactly as they have always done. In spite of your much vaunted advances and developments, there has been no change, and it is because man in his heart is governed by evil. And the story of Christianity is the story of God's activity to deliver us out of that. It is God acting for our salvation.

What is God doing? Well, we read in verse 1: "At that time there was a great persecution against *the church*." What is the church? The church is the people of God as gathered out of this world—the men and women who have been rescued by God—the men and women who have been separated by God from this evil system, this evil power, this dominion of sin and of Satan. That is what the church is. The whole story of the Bible is the story of God's deliverance. God comes down and announces that He has a plan and that He has a way: the seed of the woman shall bruise the serpent's head (see Gen. 3:15). There it is. There is the great promise. The rest of the Bible is the unfolding of this promise.

So how has God carried out His promise? Well, here is a bird's-eye view of the Old Testament. God calls a man named Abraham (Stephen has said all this in his great speech recorded in Acts 7), calls him out of the paganism of Ur of the Chaldees, reveals Himself to Abraham, and produces a nation out of him. God's people! Abraham and the nation of Israel. A separate people! Separated from the world, living a new way, a holy way, the way of God. Of course, they are not perfect, but God intervenes on their behalf and saves them time and time again. He sends teachers and prophets. That is the Old Testament. It is the story of God working out a people for Himself, setting up His own kingdom, a kingdom of light against the kingdom of darkness, the kingdom of God against the kingdom of hell.

Then we come to the New Testament, and we read that "when the fullness of the time was come" Jesus appeared (Gal. 4:4). Who was this? The Son of God! He is the focus of it all—God in the flesh! And what has the Son of God come to do? He has come to fight these enemies of humankind. Look at Him being tempted by the devil for forty days and forty nights in the wilderness, and tempted at other times too. What are His activities? Casting out devils, healing the sick and afflicted. What is all this? This is dealing with the consequences of evil; this is setting men and women free from that which enslaves them and makes them behave in this irrational manner. That is what He does. That is the account we have of Him in the Gospels. He never delivers a political protest—never. He is not interested in social problems as such. He goes down to the depth, the root cause, which He realizes is in the soul,

not merely in the mind and intellect. And He deals with the radical problem in a radical manner.

Of course, supremely He dealt with it upon the cross. It is the machinations of the devil, through evil men, that sent Him there. Men actually work the deed, but there is something deeper in it. What Jesus was doing on the cross, says Saul of Tarsus later as the apostle Paul writing to the Colossians, was this: "Having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it" (Col. 2:15). When they thought they had Him, He defeated them, and He proved it in the glory of the resurrection when He rose, having even conquered the last enemy, and ascended into heaven, from where He sent down the Holy Spirit, added to the church, and called, and calls, out His people.

But God's people are not left alone. Though the devil is defeated, he is not yet finally routed and destroyed, and he goes on working. He worked in Saul of Tarsus, he worked in the Sanhedrin, he worked in the Jews, and through the centuries he has tried to destroy God's people, even working through a corrupt church. That is the message. It is all here in embryo in these verses in Acts. What is happening here? The devil is trying to exterminate the Christian church because it is the people of God whom God has separated unto Himself and whom He is preparing for the final glory and the great kingdom that is to come, the kingdom that is to cover the whole universe from shore to shore.

And, thank God, I end on this note: God's triumph is absolutely certain. The most wonderful word in this text is the first word in the fourth verse: "*Therefore* they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word." The members of the Sanhedrin thought they were going to exterminate the church, but in this cruel persecution designed to that end, do you know what they were doing? Spreading the Gospel! "*Therefore*"! They were sending the good news out of Jerusalem, throughout Judea, into Samaria. They were doing the exact opposite of what they intended. The effect of their attempt to destroy the Gospel was to spread it.

Notice another word that is used in verse 4: "*Therefore* they that were *scattered abroad* . . ." The Greek word that is here translated "*scattered abroad*" was used for a farmer sowing seed in the ground. They did not have drills in those days. The farmer put all his seed in a basket or a pan, and then he took handfuls of seed and just threw it, "*scattered it abroad.*" And that is how he got his crop.

So what did the persecution do? It "*scattered abroad*" the Word of God. The persecution had the effect of sowing the seed of the Word. This is most

marvelous. Just before His ascension, our Lord spoke to the disciples and told them to wait in Jerusalem until they had received power from on high. Then He said, “After that the Holy Ghost is come upon you . . . ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). That was His prophecy.

How was His prophecy fulfilled? Through the persecution perpetrated by these cruel, maddened opponents of the Christian faith. Or take another great prophecy of our Lord. He had said, “And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come” (Matt. 24:14), and here is the beginning of the end. The Gospel is spreading; the kingdom is gathering in men and women from all nations and tribes and languages.

“Therefore” (Acts 8:4)! The meaning of “therefore” is the power of God. The teaching is that God rules over all, even over His enemies. He permits much to happen that we do not understand. Why did He allow this persecution of the first believers? I do not know. All I know is that He used it. Look at Saul of Tarsus, this man who was converted on the road to Damascus and became the mighty apostle Paul. Why did God allow him to behave as he did at this point? I do not know. All I know is that God has His time for us all. So Paul only went on until God’s determined hour had come, and then he was subdued. God permits much; He is permitting much in the modern world. He is allowing skepticism, materialism, infidelism, all these things. But as certainly as He allows it, He is behind it all, He is controlling it all, He overrules it all. “Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word.”

God’s victory is certain; the destruction of all His enemies is already fixed. Though people rise up in anger and with vituperation and violence try to destroy His work, they cannot. Their final discomfiture was at the Resurrection, and here is a repetition of it, and this has gone on throughout the running centuries. There have been times when the Christian church has been moribund; but then suddenly God has raised up a Luther, and the dead church has come to life and gone forth scattering abroad the Word.

I therefore finish with a simple question: Have you faced these facts? Have you faced the fact that the Son of God has been in this world and that He died on a cross, that He was buried, and that He rose again? Have you faced the question as to why He did that? Can you not see that there is only one explanation, and it is that “all have sinned” (Rom. 3:23), that all the world is guilty before God (Rom. 3:19)? Perhaps you have never thought of the fact that you have to die and stand before God in judgment—and you

have never thought of that because you have never faced these facts. You who have psychological and personal problems, have you faced the fact that the Son of God came into this world and died on a tree and was buried and rose again? Have you ever asked why? The answer is that He came not that your body might be healed, though it might be, but that your soul might be healed and that you might be reconciled to God. Have you ever considered these facts? And have you ever realized their relevance for you?

This is Christianity. You are involved in this cosmic, spiritual conflict, and though you may never have acted violently against Christianity, if you have just ignored it, you are equally its opponent. Not to consider it, not to consider that it is vital, not to see that it is everything, is to reject it, and to reject it is to reject God, the power of God, and the purpose of the manifestation of the power of God. It is to reject the coming again of this same Jesus to judge the world in righteousness, to condemn and to banish all evil, and to set up His glorious kingdom of light and knowledge and truth and love and peace and joy.

My dear friend, do you belong to the church or to those who are set against the church? If you are not in, you are out; if you are not for, you are against—whether violently or politely and quietly. And not to be in the church is to be lost. Moreover, it is not only to continue in your present misery for as long as you are in this evil, miserable world, but it is also to remain in that utter misery and hopelessness forever and forever. Do you belong to the church? Do you glory in her? Do you see that she consists of the people redeemed by the power of God through His blessed Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ?

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## NOTES

1. This sermon was preached on November 12, 1967.
2. Now published in *Romans 14: Liberty and Conscience* (Banner of Truth Trust).
3. This refers to the Six-Day War between Israel and neighboring Arab states in June 1967. The war ended in victory for Israel, which gained an area over three times its pre-1967 size.
4. William Sargant, *The Battle for the Mind: A Physiology of Conversion and Brainwashing* (London: Penguin Books, 1961).
5. This sermon was preached on December 17, 1967.
6. This sermon was preached on Christmas Eve, 1967.
7. 1968.
8. This was the last sermon preached by Dr. Lloyd-Jones at Westminster Chapel as its minister. He was suffering from a fatal illness and had to retire.