

GOSPEL GUIDE

UNDERSTANDEST THOU WHAT THOU READEST?
HOW CAN I, EXCEPT SOME MAN SHOULD GUIDE ME? (ACTS 8:30,31)

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The Growth of the Church

THE CHURCH IN THE FIRST CENTURY had a phenomenal growth. In the parable Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed, "which indeed is less than all seeds; but when it is grown, it is greater than the herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the heaven come and lodge in the branches thereof." (Matthew 13:31-32). This parable had its fulfillment in the growth of the church.

In the beginning the twelve apostles, filled with the Holy Spirit, proclaimed the gospel on the day of Pentecost following the resurrection of Christ. About three thousand souls responded to the message that day (Acts 2). Then the number became five thousand (Acts 4:4), and then "The word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem exceedingly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7). When a short time later a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem, and the brethren were scattered, they "went everywhere preaching the word" (Acts 8:4). A few short years later Paul wrote

that the gospel had been preached "in all creation under heaven" (Colossians 1:23).

What was the reason for such growth of the church? Several reasons are apparent.

CONVICTION BY TRUTH

Jesus had said, "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." (John 8:32). The disciples were convinced that in the gospel they had this truth which could free them from sin and give them a hope of salvation (Romans 1:16). Because of their conviction in regard to its power to save, their mouths could not be closed, by opposition, by persecution, by geographical distances, but only by

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Mail Address:
PO Box 1109
Athens, AL 35612 US

e-mail Address:
Gospel-Guide@MyWay.com

web page:
www.gospel-guide.org

Editor: Billy Norris

GROWTH

death itself. Under such conviction they not only preached the gospel through the known world of that day, but they also stood in defense of it, as Paul and Barnabas when the Judaizing teachers came to Antioch (Acts 15).

DILIGENCE IN TEACHING

The church of the first century grew rapidly because the early disciples were diligent and persistent in their teaching and preaching the gospel. Concerning their great work we can read, "And every day, in the temple and at home, they ceased not to teach and to preach Jesus as the Christ" (Acts 5:42). Paul says that he "ceased not to admonish every one night and day with tears" (Acts 20:31). With the first century Christians, spreading the kingdom was an every day proposition, not only every day, but also day and night (Acts 20:21). It is little wonder that with such diligence in preaching Christ and him crucified that the church did indeed grow rapidly.

COURAGE IN PERSECUTION

A relatively short time after the church was established in Jerusalem opposition arose, at first fairly mild; but as time passed, it became progressively severe, until the disciples had to flee Jerusalem in order to save their lives. (Acts 4-8). However, even such vicious persecution could not seal their lips, though they fled from Jerusalem, they went everywhere preaching the word. It turned out that because of their great faith the persecution had the opposite effect of that desired by the enemies of the disciples. Instead of stamping out Christianity it helped to spread the kingdom even more rapidly than might have been so under more favorable circumstances.

PURITY IN LIFE

The great principles of conduct contained in the gospel, and applied in the lives of the early Christians, did indeed set them apart as a peculiar people in the midst of a crooked and untoward generation. In their obedience to the gospel, coming from the watery grave of baptism, they arose as new creatures to "walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4). Their lives were different from the lives of the people generally in that that even the heathen had to be favorably impressed with the difference. It is said that someone, impressed by the superior lives of the Christians, said, "What wives and mothers these Christians make."

CONCERN IN DISCIPLINE

When the early disciples failed to live in harmony with the great principles of conduct contained in

the gospel, others were taught to be concerned about their misconduct. When discipline needed to be applied by the church in Corinth, Paul said, "Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?" (1 Corinthians 5:6). Discipline was applied by privately discussing the matter with the guilty. Then if the guilty did not respond, the matter was brought to the attention of the church as a whole. Still if the guilty did not repent, the brethren withdrew from association with the guilty until he was brought to a proper recognition of his wrong and was willing to repent. If, after all efforts were made to lead him to repent, and he still persisted in his evil, he would have to be considered as a "heathen man and a publican" (Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 5; 2 Corinthians 2; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14, 15; Romans 16:17). Such discipline was not only good for the individual who needed to turn from his misconduct, but it showed that the early disciples were concerned about keeping the church as Christ would have it—"a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing" (Ephesians 5:27).

UNITY IN PRACTICE

Another reason for the phenomenal growth of the early church was the unity of the disciples. Jesus prayed that his disciples might be united even as he and the Father were united (John 17:20,21). This means that Jesus prayed that a perfect and absolute unity might characterize his disciples, and that such unity would cause the world to believe on him. The

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unity of the Christians in Jerusalem, then, caused people to believe because they are described as being “of one heart and soul” (Acts 4:3.) To a congregation not united as it should have been Paul said, “I beseech you, brethren, through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Corinthians 1:10). A group of godly people, bound together by their love for truth and their love for each other, must have made a deep impression upon the people of that day. Such unity among God’s people today will still cause the world to believe that for which Jesus prayed.

FAITHFULNESS IN WORSHIP

Another reason for the great and rapid growth of the church in the first century was their constancy in worship. The scripture says “they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread (the Lord’s supper), and in prayers” (Acts 2:42). When people love the Lord, and regularly meet to honor him in worship, they are bound to make an impression upon the community for good—an impression that will cause others to want to obey the gospel, and the church to grow.

CHARITY IN MISUNDERSTANDING

Since the church is made up of human beings, there is always the possibility of human frailties showing themselves not only in the form of misconduct, but also in the form of misunderstanding among brethren. Such occurred in the early church. In the Jerusalem church one group thought that their widows were being neglected in the daily ministrations. This situation was successfully handled by a sympathetic attitude of one group toward the other and by “continuing steadfastly in prayer and the ministry of God’s word” (Acts 6). Paul expressed the attitude the Lord’s servant must have: “And the Lord’s servant must not strive, but be gentle toward all, apt to teach, forbearing, in meekness correcting them that oppose themselves; if peradventure God may give them repentance unto the knowledge of the truth, and they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him unto his will” (2 Timothy 2:24-26).

GENEROSITY IN GIVING

The early Christians did not resort to schemes, such as raffles, games, suppers, etc., to raise money to carry on the Lord’s work. They gave as they were prospered, laying by in store on the first day of the week (1 Corinthians 16:1, 2). When the need arose, some even sold their property and gave the

price thereof to meet the emergency of temporal need existing among the brethren at that time. (Acts 4:34-37). This generosity on their part not only enabled them to care for their brethren in need but also to help support those who went out preaching the gospel of Christ throughout the world of that day.

SATISFACTION WITH DIVINE AUTHORITY

One basic factor that enabled the church to grow in the first century as it did was the willingness on the part of the disciples to humble themselves to divine authority and to follow the divine instruction in spreading the kingdom. They knew that in the gospel they had the power adequate to do the work God intended (Romans 1:16). They did not devise creeds, nor set up conventions, nor synods, nor any other human organizations. Satisfied that God’s way was far better than anything they had known, or could know by their own human judgment. They went out preaching, preaching constantly, Christ and him crucified to a world lost in sin. Their efforts, in humble submission to divine authority, resulted in the extensive growth of the church in the first century.

For these same reasons the church today can experience the same kind of growth, until it covers the earth as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:9). — BN

“The word of God kept on spreading ...” — Acts 6:7

THE WORD OF GOD

God provided Adam and Eve an earthly paradise with all the necessities of life. There was only one restriction. "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die"(Genesis 2:16,17). The serpent said the opposite "You shall not surely die" (Genesis 3:4). God's word was true, the serpent's was a lie.

That day Adam and Eve came under the sentence of death. They were driven out of their earthly paradise into a world of suffering—the consequence of choosing the lie of Satan rather than the truth of God. Christ knew the truth of God's word: "Your word is truth" (John 17:17). He also knew the lies of Satan: "He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it" (John 8:44).

Today many are choosing the lie, and its dreadful eternal consequences!

A Great Declaration

THE FOUNDING FATHERS of our country made a great declaration. On July 4, 1776, Congress adopted the final draft of the Declaration of Independence: "When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.—" Long before this important declaration the apostle Paul made a far greater.

**"Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel."
(1 Corinthians 15:1.)**

However, Paul was not just now for the first time declaring to the Corinthians the gospel, for he states in the next verse that he had already preached it to them, and by it they were saved. The fact that he is declaring the gospel, or making it known again, shows that it is worthy of being preached again and again. In regard to the first principles of the gospel, members of the church may say, "We have heard that so much before." Yet, there may be visitors who have not, or children who have not, and more than likely the very members who think they are beyond the first principles of the gospel cannot give scripture for the plan of salvation. Peter saw the necessity

of repeating truths of the gospel: "Wherefore I will not be negligent to put you in remembrance of these things, though ye know them, and be established in the present truth." (2 Pet. 1:12.)

What is the gospel?

1. *Facts to be believed.* In this passage Paul so defines the gospel of Christ: "Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures." (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). Thus Paul shows that the three great facts of the gospel are the death of Christ, the burial of Christ, and the resurrection of Christ from the dead. Without

DECLARATION

these facts there could be no gospel. These facts must be believed.

2. *Commands to be obeyed.* Obedience is essential to man's salvation: "Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; and being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him" (Hebrews 5:8,9). Since obedience is necessary for our salvation, and facts cannot be obeyed, God, in his infinite wisdom and love, provided commands which we can obey. Faith is a command. "And this is his commandment, That we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment" (1 John 3:23). Repentance is a command. "And the times of this ignorance God winked at: but now commandeth all men every where to repent." (Acts 17:30.) Baptism in the name of the Lord is a command. "And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord" (Acts 10:48).

Studying and rightly dividing the word of God is a command. "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). Eating the Lord's supper, giving as we have been prospered, praying, singing in worship are all commands that we must obey (1 Corinthians 11:24-26; 1 Corinthians 16:1-3; 1 Thessalonians 5:17; Ephesians 5:19). There are commands that must be obeyed in regard to personal conduct (1 Timo-

thy 5:22; Philippians 2:5; 1 Peter 1:21,22); and we are to be faithful to Christ even unto death (Revelation 2:10).

3. *Promises to be enjoyed.* Peter calls them "exceeding great and precious promises." "Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust." (2 Peter 1:4). In answer to the people's question on the day of Pentecost, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Peter announced two of these exceeding great and precious promises: "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" (Acts 2:37,38). When penitent believers are baptized in the name of Christ, they have the promise of the remission of sins, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes people ask, "How do we know when our sins are forgiven?" We know that God always keeps his word, and his promise is that when people are baptized into Christ, they become new creatures, with old things passed away, and all things become new (2 Corinthians 5:17). Like the Ethiopian eunuch and the Philippian jailor, they may rejoice then because God has kept his precious promise. Just before Christ was crucified, he made a great promise: "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come

again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also" (John 14:2,3). In these promises the one who obeys and lives by the gospel may indeed rejoice.

"Which I preached unto you" (1 Corinthians 15:1).

In the early part of his first letter to the Corinthians Paul said, "And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified." (1 Corinthians 2:1,2). Though the city of Corinth was noted for its abominable wickedness, Paul came determined to bring to them the one and only power that could save lost souls—the gospel of Christ (Romans 1:16). His preaching the gospel in this wicked city did the job; God's word did not return void, for later in the epistle, after enumerating a long list of sinners, he said, "And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:11). In our text he said, "Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; by which also ye are saved." (1 Corinthians 15:1,2).

Indeed this is a great declaration of a great power—the gospel of Christ. Why then turn to the gimmicks and devices of men, when only the gospel of Christ can save our souls?—BN

LOVE BEYOND QUESTION

Jonathan, the son of king Saul, loved David with a love that bound their souls together. The “soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul (1 Samuel 18:1-4).

Ruth loved Naomi her mother-in-law with a love that bound them together for life, Naomi thought it best for her daughter-in-law to remain in her land with her own people. But Ruth said: “Entreat me not to leave you, Or to turn back from following after you; For wherever you go, I will go; And wherever you lodge, I will lodge; Your people shall be my people, And your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, And there will I be buried. The LORD do so to me, and more also, If anything but death parts you and me” (Ruth 1:16,17).

There is however a love that surpasses all other—the love of God for sinful man. “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:11). Carefully read Romans 6:3-13.

Restitution

JOHN THE BAPTIST, when he preached to the multitudes in the regions round about Jordan (Luke 3:7-14) “said therefore to the multitudes that went out to be baptized of him, Ye offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance, and begin not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father; for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children to Abraham ...”

There is a special problem associated with producing fruit worthy of repentance that applies to certain types of sins. It is the problem of restitution. “Restitution” simply means the act of restoring something to its rightful owner or to its rightful condition. There are certain types of sins that do remove things from their rightful owner or their rightful condition. The question arises as to whether a person who has committed such a sin has any obligation to restore that something as part of the fruit that his repentance produces, assuming that the person does repent. To clarify the issue, suppose I steal a thousand dollars. Suppose I become convinced at a later time that I was wrong in doing this. The question is: In repenting of this sin, am I obliged to return the thousand dollars to the person from whom it was stolen?

To answer this question, we observe that there is a strong precedent for restitution in the Law of Moses. In Exodus 22, the matter of stolen goods is discussed. This pas-

sage deals with two situations—the case where the stolen goods have been disposed of and the case where they have not. Exodus 22:1 deals with the first of these: “If a man shall steal an ox, or a sheep, and kill it, or sell it; he shall pay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep.” Notice that in this case, not only is restitution required, but, in fact, either a fourfold or a fivefold restitution. Exodus 22:4 deals with the second case: “If the theft be found in his hand alive, whether it be ox or ass or sheep; he shall pay double.” (See also Leviticus 6:4-5 for other cases.)

In the New Testament we find an example of an application of the principle of restitution in Luke 19:5-8. This example concerns Zacchaeus, the little man who climbed a sycamore tree near Jericho to see Jesus: “And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up, and said unto him, Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for today I must abide at thy house. And he made haste, and came down, and received him joyfully. And when they saw it, they

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murmured, saying, He is gone in to lodge with a man that is a sinner. And Zacchaeus stood, and said unto the Lord, Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have wrongfully exacted ought of any man, I restore fourfold." Zacchaeus possessed an admirable attitude toward those whom he had defrauded, whether intentionally or not. He was ready to pay four times the amount by which he had overcharged.

I think by now we should be

beginning to see the answer to the question about restitution. If I repent, should I restore the thousand dollars that I stole? The answer is undoubtedly "Yes!" Perhaps a better question is: Besides restoring in full, how much additional should I pay?

Let's make the example a little more complicated. Suppose I am caught and convicted of stealing the thousand dollars and am put in jail for a period of time. Does the jail sentence nullify the need for restoration? Does a jail term itself compensate for the debt I owe? When I finish my term, if I have stashed

away the money, can I spend it as if it were my own? I contend that unless restitution is made to the fullest extent possible, true repentance has not taken place. I *willed* to have the thousand dollars that belonged to someone else. Repentance is a *change* of will. Thus, if I have genuinely repented, I will no longer *will* to have the thousand dollars, and so will return it. The jail sentence notwithstanding. The fruit of repentance includes restitution whenever restitution is appropriate to the sin committed.

— Benjie Norris

The Shepherd and the Lost Sheep

"THEN DREW NEAR UNTO HIM all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, 'This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.' And he spake this parable unto them, saying, 'What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, 'Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost. I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety nine just persons, which need no repentance'" (Luke 15:1-7).

This is the first of three parables in this chapter, each of which expresses the Lord's concern for the lost. In this article we shall restrict our remarks to this one—THE LOST SHEEP.

These parables were prompted by the attitude of the scribes and Pharisees (verses 1 and 2), an attitude which Jesus not only condemned in them, but would likewise condemn in us.

The Shepherd Accused

First, we note that we should not despair when revilers come; and come they certainly shall! This is the "Chief Shepherd" whom they charge. In such passages as John 15:18 and 1 John 3:13 we are reminded that since the world hated Him, we can expect similar treatment. Instead of despair, when such comes, we are told to rejoice. "Blessed

are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you." (Matthew 5:11-12).

This is a bitter charge, so far as His accusers were concerned, but really a very high tribute—"This man receiveth sinners." It is indeed, many times, an honor to be *falsely* accused for the cause of Christ. Note that there was murmuring on earth, but rejoicing in heaven; such joy as should characterize us when sinners are privileged to hear His saving message.

Yes, He indeed "receiveth sinners"! It was for this purpose He came into the world. "For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). He reminded another audience that it is "they that are sick" that "need a physician." (Luke 5:29-32). Yes, this "Great Physician, this "Good Shepherd," receiveth "whosoever will." "And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let

“BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HAVE NOT SEEN AND YET HAVE BELIEVED”

“Now Thomas, called the Twin, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said to him, ‘We have seen the Lord.’ So he said to them, ‘Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.’

“And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, ‘Peace to you!’

Then He said to Thomas, ‘Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing.’

And Thomas answered and said to Him, “My Lord and my God!”

“Jesus said to him, “Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:24-29).

We are among the blessed, for we have never seen Christ, and yet because of the undeniable evidence, we gladly stake our eternal destiny on Him.

WHY DO PEOPLE SIN?

him take the water of life freely.” (Revelation 22:17).

The Shepherd Heard

Now, consider the purpose for which the publicans and sinners gathered about Him—“for to hear him” (v. 1). How badly the scribes and Pharisees needed to have assembled for the same purpose, as did Mary who sat at Jesus’ feet (Luke 10:39). Yea, and as we should come into every assembly of the church to hear His word. The eternal destiny of our souls depends upon our hearing Him. God Himself said, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him” (Matthew 17: 5). Peter also exhorted, “For Moses truly said unto the fathers, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you” (Acts 3:22). See also Hebrews 1:1,2; Acts 2:41; and Mark 13:37.

The Shepherd, Our Refuge

Think for a moment about the Shepherd, the Savior. “The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want” (Psalm 23:1). This is the matchless Son of God. He who was “in the beginning with God” (John 1:2), but condescended to become flesh and dwell among men (John 1:14). Why should He concern Himself with us? “Because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19), and that “while we were yet sinners” (Romans 5:8).

The Shepherd Concerned

THE LOST? “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Romans

3:23). All are as “sheep gone astray” (1 Peter 2:25). “It is not in man that walketh to direct his steps” (Jeremiah 10:23). We need the Shepherd to direct us. In Him only is salvation (Ephesians 1:7), and those who come to Him, through obedience to His commands, He will “in nowise cast out “ (John 6:37). There will be rejoicing by Him and the hosts of heaven at the return of one single sinner! Surely, the Shepherd is concerned about the “ninety and nine,” but those lost sheep warrant special concern.

The Shepherd’s Followers

We should conduct ourselves in such a manner that sinners will “draw nigh” to hear us proclaim Him and His salvation. We are not OF the world, but are IN the world to serve as leaven—as a saving influence. Several times even His disciples would have prevented His association with sinners. How often WE prevent, stand in the way of, sinners coming to HIM! Better that a millstone be hanged about our necks and be cast into the midst of the sea!

The Shepherd’s Invitation

The anxiety of the “Good Shepherd” for the lost sheep is expressed in His invitation in Matthew 11:28, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” For each one who heeds this blessed invitation there is rejoicing in heaven, although it might bring reviling and murmuring among men.

WHAT WILL YOUR RESPONSE BE?

— Charles G. Maples, Sr.

Contact Information: