

Preaching in the Early Church

By Dr. Dallas Burddette
Website: freedominchrist.net
Email: dburdette22@charter.net

The earliest recorded formula of the apostolic *kerygma* is found in the fifteenth chapter of First Corinthians. It introduces Paul's great argument for the resurrection. "I delivered unto you first of all that which also I received: that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures." Here in the briefest and most compact form we have the substance of the *kerygma* of the early church. It presents clearly and briefly the fact that Christ Jesus lived and died and rose again for us and for our salvation.¹

As we begin our search for an identification of preaching in the early church, we should begin with the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus the Messiah to the nation of Israel. Even though the Gospels do not spell out in microscopic details the total essence of the Gospel, as do the Epistles, nevertheless, we can gather nuggets, here and there, that describe the Gospel in its "kernel" form, though not in its full bloom. As we approach an understanding of the subject of preaching the Gospel in the early church, we, today, need to determine the proper point of departure in our proclamation of the Good News. The Scriptures should give us our starting theme. The point of departure for preaching is found in the words of Peter: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (16:16). The early preaching of the church focused on this central question: Who is Jesus? This question is the critical issue and the true starting point in the matter of understanding preaching in the early church.

Unfortunately, today many Christians have lost their focus on New Testament preaching. The world is full of Christianities, that is to say, various factions clouded with traditions of past centuries, which traditions are frequently identified as the Gospel of God. The church (Christ's body of believers) is constantly in danger of losing its proper focus by being a slave to its historical, or cultural, and denominational background. In other words, we should begin our exploration with the Apostles if we wish to discover the very heart, or full bloom, of its subject matter. Like an archaeologist, we must go to the quarry (New covenant Scriptures as well as the Hebrew Scriptures) to dig for answers. As we seek answers as to what the early church preached, we are confronted with the question that Jesus asked His disciple about His identity in

¹ Hugh Thomson Kerr, *Preaching in the Early Church*, The Moore Lectures (New York: Revell, 1942), 20, 21.

Caesarea (sēs' à-rē' à) Philippi (fī-līp' ī): “Who do people say the Son of Man is” (Matthew 16:13)? This is the critical issue for an understanding of biblical preaching (the Gospel) rather than a particular quotation or an exceptional interpretation from one of the church fathers as the final voice of appeal for the word of truth. **The Gospel of the first-century is not what is often preached from our modern pulpits.** For some, Christianity is bound up with **ecclesiastical rites** and dogmatic adherence to odd traditions. If we do not adhere to the so-called prescribed rituals within a distinctive local fellowship, then we who refuse to submit to their odd interpretations are excluded from this body of believers under the charge of heresy.

Within Christendom today, we observe the strife of tongues and the extinction of love. **What did the early church preach?** This is the critical question that we must face if we wish to understand preaching in the first century. Yes, they preached Jesus! Why? Jesus told Nicodemus: “Whoever does not believe [in me] stands condemned already” (John 3:18). Believe “what” is the question. Jesus told Nicodemus: “Whoever believes in him [in me] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son” (3:18).

The New Testament furnishes the substance of the preaching of the Apostles, which message eventually overthrew paganism. The message proclaimed by the early church is the only message that justifies the name of preaching. The Gospel of Matthew sets forth the preaching of both John and Jesus in their ministries. The Book of Acts details many of the sermons of Peter and Paul, which document gives the central part of their preaching. This analysis of the preaching of Jesus’ Apostles and His disciples should set the stage for a correct understanding of what they proclaimed to those on the outside of God’s New Covenant. If we were to transport today’s preachers back to the first century, the early Church would not recognize much of what is hailed as preaching today. The following quote from Samuel Zwemer (1862-1952, American missionary and scholar) sets the stage for this examination on the development of preaching in the early church:

In all of Paul’s epistles he bears witness to Christ crucified and risen again, as the very sum and substance of his message. The atonement on the Cross and the Resurrection as its seal and glory are never separated. We have it expressed very strongly in his statement in 1 Corinthians 15:1-5.²

AN EXAMINATION OF THE GOSPELS

As stated above, John the Baptist is an excellent place to begin in one’s quest for apostolic preaching in the early Church. John, the herald (κῆρυξ, *kēryx*) of the Christ, came preaching repentance and the kingdom of God. Matthew writes: “In those days John the Baptist came, **preaching** (κηρύσσω, *kēryssōn*) in the Desert of Judea” (Matthew 3:1). Matthew immediately identifies this preaching: “Repent, for the **kingdom of heaven is near**” (3:2). After the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist, Matthew records the activities of Jesus by writing: “From that time on Jesus began to preach (κηρύσσειν, *kēryssein*, “to proclaim”), “Repent, for the **kingdom of heaven is near**” (4:17). This statement describes the activities of Jesus

² Samuel Marinus Zwemer, *The Glory of the Empty Tomb* (New York: Revell Company, 1957), 121.

following His leaving Nazareth and dwelling in Capernaum (4:13). Following this statement about Jesus' preaching that the "kingdom of heaven is near, Matthew then describes the ministry of Jesus in 4:23: "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching (διδάσκων, *didaskōn*) in their synagogues, preaching (κηρύσσων, *kēryssōn*) the good news of the kingdom, and healing (θεραπεύων, *therapeuōn*) every disease and sickness among the people."

Matthew draws attention to three activities: (1) teaching, (2) preaching, and (3) healing. Immediately after calling attention to "teaching," he sets forth the Sermon on the Mount as illustrative of His teaching. Matthew adds his editorial comments concerning the reaction of the crowd who listened to Jesus' teaching: "When Jesus had finished saying these things (λόγους, *logous*, "words"), the crowds were amazed at his teaching (διδασχῆ, *didachē*),²⁹ because he taught (ἦν γὰρ διδάσκων, *ēn gar didaskōn*, "for he was teaching") as one who had authority, and not as their teachers (γραμματεῖς, *grammateis*, "scribes") of the law" (7:28-29). Following the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5—7), Matthew illustrates His healing powers by listing ten specific miracles in Chapters 8—9. These ten miracles were, no doubt, only the tip of the ice-berg, so to speak. After calling attention to the healing of the man with leprosy (8:1-4), the healing of a centurion (8:5-13), and the healing of Peter's mother-in-law (8:14-15), he discloses numerous healings without specific identification of the individuals: "When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick.¹⁷ This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: 'He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases'"^a (8:15-16).

Matthew cites a section from Isaiah (53:4) to emphasize the Messianic fulfillment of the prophet Isaiah's prediction about the coming Messiah. Matthew then injects a nontherapeutic miracle, a miracle of calming the storm (8:23-27). Following this miracle, he then returns to another specific miracle—the healing of two demon-possessed men (8:28-34). He then records another miracle that involved the healing of a paralytic [number six], which miracle calls attention to His deity (9:1-8). Later, Jesus raises a dead girl (9:18-19, 23-26). Following this miracle of raising the dead, Jesus cured a woman who had suffered bleeding for twelve years (9:20-22). Matthew closes his section on healing with two more miracles: [1] Jesus heals two blind men (9:27-31) and [2] Jesus heals a man who could not speak (9:32-34). These two Chapters (8 and 9) list nine specific therapeutic miracles and one nontherapeutic miracle. Once again, Matthew repeats his statement about Jesus' ministry: "Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness" (9:35).

Following the two Chapters about Jesus' healing ministry, Matthew catalogues the Twelve called by Jesus for the purpose of going out into the "harvest field" (10:1-4). After this grouping, Jesus sent the Twelve out with instructions concerning their mission (10:5-42). Again, Matthew calls attention to "teaching" and "preaching" in the towns of Galilee (11:1). He summarizes once more the activities the disciples were to participate in: "After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach (διδάσκειν, *didaskein*) and preach (κηρύσσειν, *kēryssein*) in the towns of Galilee"^a (11:1). At this time, John had

^a Isaiah 53:4

^a Greek *in their towns*

already been arrested and wanted to know if Jesus is really **the** Christ, even though John had earlier identified Jesus as the Savior of the world (John 1:29, 35). John's disciples went to Jesus at John's request to find out if He really is the Messiah. Jesus' response is quite revealing, especially for the poor. Listen to Jesus' reply:

Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The **blind** receive sight, the **lame** walk, those who have **leprosy**^b are cured, the **deaf** hear, the **dead** are raised, and the good news is preached (**εὐαγγελίζονται**, *euangelizontai*, "are evangelized") to the **poor**. ⁶ Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me." (Matthew 11:4-6)

Earlier, Matthew reported the ministry of Jesus throughout Galilee by saying: "Jesus went throughout Galilee, **teaching** in their synagogues, **preaching** the good news of the kingdom, and **healing** every disease and sickness among the people" (4:23). Jesus announced that the new era had dawned, that is, the time spoken of by the prophets. The prophet Daniel, six-hundred years earlier, prophesied about God's kingdom (rule or domain), a kingdom that represents the Reign or Sovereignty of God's rule (Daniel 2:44). Daniel, through the Holy Spirit, spoke of this kingdom as coming into existence during the time of the Caesars: "In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever" (2:44).

Once more, Daniel gives the time of the coming of the Messiah so that when this coming takes place, individuals could identify the time of the fulfillment: "to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness" (9:24). Isaiah also predicts the coming of the Messiah with His kingdom (Isaiah 2). He also speaks of the virgin birth of Christ in (7:14) and again, he writes about this unique birth in (9:6)—"to us a child is born." Again, he speaks of this child as a "**Branch**" (נְצַחַת, *šĕ-măḥ*, see Isaiah 4:2; see also Jeremiah 23:5 and Zechariah 3:8) that will bear fruit and come up from the stump of Jesse (11:1). Then, toward the end of his book, he sets forth the idea of the Suffering Servant for the sins of the people (Chapter 53).

The information as to Jesus' in-depth preaching is withheld to a great extent by the four Gospel writers. Having said this, one is not left completely in the dark as one struggles to grasp the content of what the Gospel of God consisted. For starters, John the Baptist revealed His purpose in coming—to reveal Jesus to Israel as the Savior of the world (John 1:31). Even though John the Baptist was born six months prior to Jesus, he could still say, "**He was before me**" (1:30). This also coincides with John's beginning words of His Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (1:1). Or the statement by Jesus to the Jews concerning His existence predating Abraham (Abraham was born in 2166 BC). Listen to the Apostle John as he writes about this incident: "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "**before Abraham was born, I am!**" (8:58). John also gives John the Baptist's testimony about his understanding of the role of Jesus as well as discloses his source of knowledge about Him:

^b The Greek word was used for various diseases affecting the skin—not necessarily leprosy.

Then John gave this testimony: “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. ³³ I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ ³⁴ I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.” (1:32-34)

God revealed to John the Baptist the Good News concerning the coming of Jesus. God’s testimony about Jesus, no doubt, covered the sufferings of Jesus on the Cross. God unfolds to him how Jesus would atone for the sins of the world, which is what the Good News is about. The day after John was baptizing in Bethany that is located on the “otherside of the Jordan” (John 1:28), he sees Jesus coming toward him and exclaimed: “**Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!**” (1:29). This “Lamb of God” is the Gospel of God! Directly after this announcement by John the Baptist, two of his disciples followed Jesus. John says that those two spent the day with Jesus (1:39). John the Apostle does not reveal the substance of the dialogue between Jesus and these two disciples; nevertheless, these two disciples were convinced that Jesus is the One whom the prophets foretold (1:40-42). Undoubtedly, He told the Good News about Himself as the Savior of the world. Not only did Andrew, one of the two mentioned by John the Apostle, but Philip, too, found Nathanael (nà-thăn’ā-ěł) and related to Him that he had found the “one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph” (1:44-45).

Later, Jesus went to Capernaum (kà-pŭr’ nā-ŭm) with his mother and brothers and His disciples. After a few days, Jesus left for Jerusalem (2:12-13). Upon arrival, He found men in the Temple selling cattle, sheep, and doves, along with others sitting at tables exchanging money (2:13). After He scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables, “Then the Jews demanded of him, “What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?” (2:18). At this point, Jesus responded by giving them a hint of what He had come to do,” which was to make atonement for the sins of the people. Listen to John the Apostle as he captures the dialogue between Jesus and the Jews concerning His authority for such action, along with his editorial comments:

Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” ²⁰ The Jews replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” ²¹ But the temple he had spoken of was his body. ²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken. ²³ Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name.^b ²⁴ But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. (2:19-25)

With just a casual reading of John’s Gospel, we discover “bits and pieces” of the Gospel, even though not yet in its full bloom. A few days later, following Jesus’ comments about His death, we discover another reference to His Death for humanity. This reference is found in Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus, one of the rulers of the Sanhedrin. Jesus says to him:

^b Or *and believed in him*

No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.^d ¹⁴ **Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,** ¹⁵ that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.^e ¹⁶ “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,^f that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ **Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.**^g ¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.”^h (John 3:13-21)

Again, Jesus speaks of His Death as necessary for the life of the world. He does this in terms of “bread,” which bread represents Himself. John records this encounter with the Jews:

I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. ⁵⁰ But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. **This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.** ⁵² Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” ⁵³ Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. ⁵⁴ Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. ⁵⁵ For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. ⁵⁶ Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. (6:47-56)

“The Son of Man must be lifted up” and “This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world” sets forth the heart of God’s Gospel. Jesus anticipated His death, even though it was about three years away. As we reflect upon the Gospel of Matthew, we are confronted with His **Death, Burial, and Resurrection** before it comes to pass. One such example is found in Jesus’ conversation with His disciples as to His true identity. After Peter’s confession, Jesus then explains to His disciples about His **Death** and **Resurrection**. Matthew gives his own comments about the conversation between Jesus and His disciples: “From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that **he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life**” (Matthew 16:21).

A week later, the Transfiguration occurred (17:1); following this event, Matthew once more, calls attention to Jesus’ statements about His death and resurrection: “When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, ‘The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of

d Some manuscripts *Man, who is in heaven*

e Or *believes may have eternal life in him*

f Or *his only begotten Son*

g Or *God’s only begotten Son*

h Some interpreters end the quotation after verse 15.

men. ²³ They will kill him, and on the **third day** he will be raised to life.’ And the disciples were filled with grief” (17:22-23). Even though Matthew does not disclose the conversation among the three (Jesus, Moses, and Elijah), nevertheless, Luke does inform his readers about the discussion: “Two men, Moses and Elijah, ³¹ appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem” (Luke 9:30-31). Later, for the third time, Jesus repeats His Death and Resurrection to His disciples:

Now as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, ¹⁸ “We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death ¹⁹ and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!” (Matthew 20:17-19)

Following Jesus’ condemnation of the religious leaders (Matthew 23), forecast of the destruction of Jerusalem (Chapter 24), and judgment against those who rejected Him and His disciples (Chapter 25), Jesus again speaks of His crucifixion: “When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, ² “As you know, the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified” (26:1-2). During the Passover meal with His disciples, Jesus says concerning the **third ritualistic cup** (“Cup of Blessing/Thanksgiving”): “Drink from it, all of you. ²⁸ This is my blood of the^b covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (26:27-28). Forgiveness of sins through the shed blood of Jesus is what the Good News of God’s Gospel is about. Mark’s Gospel reports the final comments of Jesus to His disciples concerning God’s Gospel. Listen to Mark as he records the words of Jesus: “Go into all the world and preach (κηρύξατε, *kēryxate*, “proclaim”) the good news (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον, *to euangelion* “the Gospel”) to all creation. ¹⁶ Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:15-16).

ACTS AND THE EPISTLES

Just a casual reading of the Book of Acts and the Epistles of Paul reveals the very heart of preaching in the early church. The preaching and teaching of Peter and Paul reveal that their preaching is based upon what is recorded in the four Gospels. The necessity to preach Jesus Christ and Him crucified was a heavenly mandate (See Matthew 28:16-20; Mark 16:15-16). The Book of Acts covers a period of about thirty years. The theme of this book is found in the words of Jesus to His disciples in Acts 1:8: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Fifty days after the Sabbath of Passover week, God poured out His Holy Spirit upon the Apostles. This Day of Pentecost began their ministry of witnessing to the Jews that the Christ is

^b Some manuscripts *the new*

indeed the One whom the prophets foretold would come. The Book of Acts begins in Jerusalem and ultimately reaches Rome. On the Day of Pentecost, Peter announced in bold language the redemptive work of Christ. **A new era had dawned upon the world of humanity.** Newton Flew (1886-1962, English Methodist scholar), in his monumental work on *Jesus and His Church*, captures the significance of the Day of Pentecost with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit with the following comments:

A new era had been inaugurated by the Spirit as a result of the revelation of God in the whole work of Christ, in His earthly life, in His suffering on the Cross, in His resurrection from the dead. All who accepted this revelation through Christ as a divine message entered immediately into the New Israel, the one universal Ecclesia of God, which is manifest on the earth.³

God began this new era on the Day of Pentecost with the miracle of tongues (2:1-13). Following this phenomenon, **Peter proclaims God’s Gospel by drawing attention to Jesus as the One whom God appointed to put an end to sin (see Zechariah 3:8-9).** Pay attention to Peter as he preaches the Gospel of redemption: “God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. ³³ Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear” (Acts 2:32-33). The substance of this message of redemption “in” and “through” Jesus is given by Luke (2:14-41).

Peter proclaims the Good News about God’s salvation first announced by John the Baptist and Jesus in their ministries. Peter is preaching the Gospel that he heard from Jesus. R. W. Dale’s comments on the Gospel of God, in his classic work on the Atonement, are worth citing: “The real truth is that while He came to preach the gospel, His chief object in coming was that there might be a gospel to preach.”⁴ In other words, **Jesus came not only preaching the Gospel, He Himself is the Gospel.** **The Book of Acts covers, as stated above, about thirty years, which book sets forth the preaching of the early church—Jesus and His Resurrection.**

If we wish to understand biblical preaching, it would be helpful to begin with Pentecost. This preaching on Pentecost is reminiscent of the preaching of Jesus in that He announced the Kingdom of God as near (Matthew 4:17). After Pentecost, the Apostles announced the presence of God’s kingdom as a reality. John the Apostle wrote before AD 68 that he was in the kingdom (Revelation 1:9). Prior to Jesus making His announcement about the nearness of the Kingdom of God that Daniel (605 BC) prophesied (Daniel 2:24-44), one observes John the Baptist also preaching the nearness of God’s kingdom (Matthew 3:2). With the coming of Jesus, one senses the eschatological (end-time) events unfolding that the prophets foretold. Just a perusal of the preaching after Pentecost reveals that the thrust of the preaching set forth the idea that the kingdom had come. With the coming of God’s kingdom, we witness the dissolving distinctions

³ R. Newton Flew, *Jesus and His Church* (London: The Epworth Press, 1938; reprint, London: The Epworth Press, 1960), 181 (page reference is to reprint edition).

⁴ R. W. Dale, *The Atonement: The Congregational Union Lecture for 1875* (London: Congregational Union of England and Wales, 1904), 46. **R. W. Dale** (1829–1895) was educated at Springs Hill College, University of London, University of Glasgow, and Yale University. Dale primarily pastored Carr’s Lane Chapel from 1854–1895, and later went on to become chair of The Congregational Union of England and Wales.

of sex and race within the new community of God, namely the church. The new society or fellowship (**κοινωνία**, *koinōnia*) took shape with the coming of Jesus.

As we examine the sermons in the Book of Acts, we observe that salvation was a salvation from sin and death. With this concept in mind, the early church plunged headlong into the Christian faith and fellowship. Luke reports that the disciples “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). With the coming of Christ, one recognizes a world-transforming miracle—the Rule of God initiated by Christ in which God justifies the sinner through faith in Jesus. As we seek to understand the meaning of the phrase “kingdom of God,” we find our answer in observing various phrases employed and used interchangeably. Luke, for example, writes that Jesus came “preaching the gospel” [**εὐαγγελιζόμενοι**, *euangelizomenoi*, “evangelizing”] (Luke 9:6). On the other hand, Matthew writes that Jesus came preaching that “the kingdom of heaven is near” (Matthew 4:17).

Once more, Mark says that when Jesus entered Capernaum that He “preached the word” [**ἐλάλει αὐτοῖς τὸν λόγον**, *elalei autois ton logon*, “he spoke to them the word”] (Mark 2:2). Luke also reports that Jesus went about “proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God” [**κηρύσσων καὶ εὐαγγελιζόμενος τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ**, *kēryssōn kai euangelizomenos tēn basileian tou theou*, “**proclaiming** and **preaching** the kingdom of God”] (Luke 8:1). With the synonymous expressions relating to one and the same thing, we are able to grasp the meaning of the preaching of the kingdom of heaven. To preach the kingdom of heaven is equivalent to preaching the Gospel and to preach the Gospel corresponds to preaching the word and to preach the word is identical to proclaiming the Good News of the kingdom of God.

It is “**in the gospel**” that we discover a “righteousness **from** God.” The Greek text is quite explicit concerning the revealing of this righteousness that comes from God that is imputed to one through faith in His Son. “**In the gospel**” is in the Greek text **ἐν αὐτῷ** (*en autō*, “in it”). The receiving of this “righteousness **from** God” begins with faith and ends with faith (1:17). This is the Good News that Paul and others proclaimed to both Jews and Gentiles. When we proclaim the “kingdom of God,” we make known the Good News of God’s way of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus.

Other expressions also help to clarify the meaning of “kingdom of God” as employed by John and Jesus. In the New Testament writings, we notice other expressions used interchangeably when referring to preaching in the early community of God. One such case in point is found in the Great Commission. The disciples were instructed to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). Luke reports the activities of the apostles concerning preaching: “They never stopped teaching (**διδάσκοντες**, *didasontes*) and proclaiming (**εὐαγγελιζόμενοι**, *euangelizomenoi*, “preaching”) the good news that Jesus is the Christ” (Acts 5:42). To “teach” Jesus is, no doubt, to explain the Messianic prophecies in relationship to the coming of Christ. In fact, Luke pinpoints the essence of Paul’s teaching and preaching Jesus as he reports the activities of Paul during his second missionary journey. Luke describes the preaching this way: “As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned (**διελέξατο**, *dielexato*, “lectured or reasoned”) with them from the Scriptures, ³ explaining and

proving that the Christ^a had to suffer and rise from the dead. ‘This Jesus I am proclaiming to you **is the Christ**^b’ (17:2-3).

In Acts 17:3, we see again what they proclaimed—Jesus is the Christ. Earlier in the Book of Acts, Luke reports the preaching of Philip this way: “Philip went down to a city in Samaria and **proclaimed** the Christ [ἐκήρυσσεν τὸν Χριστόν, *ekēryssen ton Christon*] (8:5). Luke also reports the outcome of his preaching with the following commentary: “But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news (εὐαγγελιζομένῳ, *euangelizomenō*, “preaching the good news”) of the kingdom of God (βασιλείας τοῦ θεοῦ, *basileias tou theou*) and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women” (8:12). When he proclaimed the “kingdom of God,” he “proclaimed the Christ,” that is to say, “he preached the good news.” In Acts 8:14, Luke reports that the people in Samaria had “accepted the word of God.” Then Luke concludes the Samaria mission with the following words: “When they had testified and proclaimed the word of the Lord, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages” (8:25). When the Samaritans accepted the Word of God, they accepted the Gospel. **The preaching of Philip focused on Jesus as God’s way of salvation.**

Following Philip’s preaching in Samaria, we witness his encounter with the Ethiopian (official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians). The Spirit of God told Philip about this individual. As a result of this rendezvous, he made contact with the Ethiopian. As he approached the chariot, he heard the man reading from Isaiah 53. After inquiring as to whether the Eunuch understood this reading, Luke informs us that Philip began with the same Scripture and “told him **the good news about Jesus**” (8:35). Later, we discover Philip at Azotus “preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea” (8:40). With just a casual reading of this conversion, one is immediately conscious of the evolution of Christianity. In other words, the Old Testament foretold the coming of the Messiah; it is now here.

In the seventh chapter of Acts, we are introduced to the sermon of Stephen. He started with Abraham (7:2) and moved on to the ministry of Moses (7:20). Ultimately, he concluded his speech with a note of condemnation of Israel for its murder of the One whom the prophets foretold (7:51-52). For Stephen, Christianity was the climax and crown of the Old Testament—Genesis through Malachi. As we reflect upon Stephen’s speech, we observe that the Word of God descends upon history through Abraham, Moses, and the prophets. He concludes his message with Jesus, the Word of God, descending upon history. He developed the evolutionary scheme of redemption “in” and “through” Christ. **Stephen presented a realistic interpretation of the Gospel of God in relation to the whole history of Israel beginning with Abraham.**

After the stoning of Stephen (7:54-60), Luke reports the activities of Philip in Samaria. Luke begins this scenario by calling attention to the scattering of the disciples and calls attention to their activities—“preached the word wherever they went” (8:4). Immediately, Luke describes the preaching of Philip in one of the towns in Samaria: “Philip went down to a city in

^a Or *Messiah*

^b Or *Messiah*

Samaria and **proclaimed the Christ**^a there” (8:5). To “preach the word” is to “proclaim the Christ.” Luke, once more, varies his expressions to capture the Good News of God to the people in Samaria. Again, listen to Luke as he writes: “But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women” (8:12). “To preach the word” is equivalent to “proclaim the Christ” and to “proclaim the Christ” is equivalent to “preach the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus.” Luke again expresses this truth about the Gospel of God with another expression: “When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them” (8:14).

Acts 9 records the conversion of Saul with Jesus’ response to Ananias (ān’ā-nī’ās) about his reluctance to go to Saul. It is significant that Jesus explains to Ananias the ministry of Saul to the Gentiles: “Go! This man is my chosen instrument **to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel** (9:15). After his conversion to Christ, he spent several days in Damascus. Immediately after his acceptance of Jesus, Luke reports that Paul did not hesitate to share Christ “before the people of Israel.” Luke writes: “At once he began to preach in the synagogues that **Jesus is the Son of God**” (9:20). Paul “grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ” (9:22). After leaving Damascus, he went to Jerusalem and “preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus” (9:27). Later, Luke gives several accounts of Paul’s ministry as he describes Paul’s preaching and teaching Jesus in various cities. Rather than continue Paul’s ministry, he interrupts the story of Paul in order to record the conversion of Cornelius (kōr-nēl’yūs, Acts 10). What did Paul preach? What did Peter preach?

The story of Cornelius’ conversion is informative as to what Cornelius was told to do to be saved. Within many Churches of Christ, the sermon Peter delivered is often overlooked. I have asked many Christians within this movement what Peter told Cornelius to do. They, almost without exception, always cited Acts 10:47-48, which states: “Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.’⁴⁸ So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.” It is true that they were told to be baptized, but is this the message of salvation? The complete sermon is found in 10:39-43. After a brief introduction, he justifies his action of preaching the Gospel to Gentiles by saying, “You know **the message God** sent to the people of Israel, **telling the good news of peace** through Jesus Christ who is Lord of all” (10:36). He then talked about his Death and Resurrection (10:39-41). Once more, he comes back to the primary purpose of preaching: “He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that **he is the one** whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead” (10:42). Peter then goes to the very heart of salvation: “All the prophets testify about him that everyone **who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name**” (10:43). This is the very message Jesus revealed to Nicodemus (nīk’ō-dē’mūs, John 3:16-18), as examined above.

What was the message Peter preached? It was the Good News of peace through Jesus Christ. Again, **he who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins**. Later, Luke reports the

^a Or *Messiah*

missionary activities of Paul and Barnabas. Upon their arrival on Cyprus, he writes: “When they arrived at Salamis, they **proclaimed the word of God** in the Jewish synagogues. John Mark was with them as their helper” (13:5). While traveling through Paphos, they **proclaimed the word of God** (13:7). One of the men is named who wanted **to hear more about Jesus**. This man, Sergius Paulus, “believed, for he was amazed at the **teaching about the Lord**” (13:12). When Paul and Barnabas preached the word of God, they were preaching and teaching Jesus. After leaving the island of Cyprus (sī’prūs), they went to Pisidian Antioch. Both Paul and Barnabas entered the synagogue and sat down (13:14). During this service, they both received an invitation to address the congregation. Part of the message delivered by Paul is quite revealing as to the substance. Give attention to Paul as he announces Jesus as God’s way of salvation:

Brothers, children of Abraham, and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this **message of salvation** has been sent.²⁷ The people of Jerusalem and their rulers **did not recognize Jesus**, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath.²⁸ Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed.²⁹ When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb.³⁰ But **God raised him from the dead**,³¹ and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people.³² **“We tell you the good news:** What God promised our fathers³³ he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: “‘You are my Son; today I have become your Father.’^{b,c}”³⁴ The fact that God raised him from the dead, never to decay, is stated in these words: “‘I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David.’^d”³⁵ So it is stated elsewhere: “‘You will not let your Holy One see decay.’^e”³⁶ “For when David had served God’s purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his fathers and his body decayed.³⁷ But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay.³⁸ “Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that **through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.**³⁹ **Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses.** (13:26-39)

For Paul, the message of salvation focused upon the Resurrection of Jesus and the forgiveness of sins “in” and “through” Him. As we search for answers in seeking to understand preaching in the early church, we should read and reread Acts 13:26-39. Paul preached Jesus, not ecclesiastical dogma or rites (rituals) or a so-called worship service with five prescribed rituals. We never read in the Book of Acts about a worship ceremony with five prearranged practices. We do not read about a sermon on accapella singing versus instrumental accompaniment. He did not preach about one cup in the observance of the Lord’s Supper. He did not deliver an oration about whether or not we should “pinch” the bread or “break” the bread in the observance of the Lord’s Supper. He did not lecture on the use of wine or the use of

b Or *have begotten you*

c Psalm 2:7

d Isaiah 55:3

e Psalm 16:10

grape juice in the observance of the Lord's Supper. He did not lecture against instrumental music. He did not speak about fellowship halls in church buildings, and so on.

If we wish to understand preaching in the early church, we should read the Book of Acts. Paul never outlined five steps to heaven nor did he develop the so-called five items (acts) of worship. For Paul, worship is presenting ourselves as a sacrifice to God—twenty-four hours a day, not just Sunday morning between the hours of 10 a.m. and 11 a.m. (Romans 12:1-2). It is time for “grace” to return to our preaching. **Within many pulpits today, “grace” has been ousted with theological orthodoxy.** We should stand in fright as we analyze the modern church with its concept of justification. Justification by faith alone is practically obsolete in many denominational Churches of Christ. Not all, but some. The church must be careful that it does not replace the Cross of Christ with hand-me-down traditions inherited from our forefathers. **The Cross must remain as the center of Christianity.**

The Atonement of Christ is the saving act of God, which is the Good News from God. For Paul, the center of gravity in the Christian **ἐκκλησία** (*ekklēsia*, “congregation,” “church”) focused upon the Cross. As we seek to understand preaching in the early church, we must turn to the preaching activity of Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. After leaving **Pisidian Antioch**, he and Barnabas traveled to **Iconium** (ī-cō'nī-ŭm, 71 miles southeast of Antioch). Various expressions, as stated above, are employed by Luke as he seeks to capture the nature of the Gospel. Prior to Paul's and Barnabas' departure from Antioch (ān'tī-ōk), Luke writes that Paul and Barnabas spoke the “word of God” to the Jews first (13:46). In this verse, it is called the “word of God,” but in verse 49, he calls this same message “the word of the Lord.”

While in **Iconium**, Luke yet again selects another phrase—“the **message of his grace**” (14:3). During this stay, they encountered hostilities from the Gentiles and Jews along with their leaders to mistreat them and stone them. Upon learning of this evil, Paul and Barnabas fled to the cities of **Lystra** (līs'trā, 14 miles south of Iconium) and **Derbe** (dūr'bē, 45 miles southeast of Lystra) and the surrounding country where “**they continued to preach the good news**” (14:7). The “word of God” equals the “word of the Lord” and the “message of his grace” equals the “good news.” In this city (Lystra), Paul and Barnabas exclaimed: “We are **bringing you good news**, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them” (14:15).

After Paul encountered problems with some Jews who stirred up trouble for him in Lystra, which persecution resulted in the stoning of him by people in the city, he and Barnabas left for Derby and “preached the good news” in that city (14:21). After this evangelistic tour, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch. Luke, instead of calling the message “good news,” this time he encourages “them to remain true **to the faith**” (14:22). Following Paul's and Barnabas' return, Luke reports about the council at Jerusalem, which council had to do with justification—works of Law or faith. After much discussion, Peter addressed the council:

Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips **the message of the gospel and believe**.⁸ God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us.⁹ He made no distinction between us and them, for he **purified their hearts by faith**.¹⁰ Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?

¹¹ No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”
(Acts 15:7-11)

Before proceeding further in the Book of Acts, it would be helpful to compare other writers with Luke’s account in his description of the Gospel of God. Christianity stands or falls upon the truthfulness of the Gospel of God. Again and again, we are confronted with the essence of God’s Gospel—justification by faith. The message of the Gospel proclaimed that God “**purified their hearts by faith.**” Grace is the means of salvation, not works. At this point, perhaps, as just stated, it would be helpful to summarize the essence of preaching in the early church calling attention to the various expressions employed:

- Jesus came preaching the “kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 4:17).
- Mark states that Jesus “preached the word” (Mark 2:2).
- Again, Luke writes that He came “preaching the gospel” (Luke 9:6)
- Once more, Jesus went from town to town to “proclaim the good news” (Luke 8:1).
- The disciples were commissioned to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19).
- Matthew records that the Apostles “never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ” (Acts 5:42).
- Those who had been scattered “preached the word” (Acts 8:4).
- Philip “proclaimed the Christ” (Acts 8:5).
- They believed Philip as he “preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ” (8:12).
- The apostles “testified and proclaimed the word of the Lord” (Acts 8:25).
- The apostles were “preaching the gospel” (Acts 8:25).
- Paul and Barnabas “proclaimed the word of God” (13:5).
- Paul said, “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ” (Acts 17:3).
- Paul was “preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection” (Acts 17:18).

We detect from the above vocabulary that the writers of the New Testament books fluctuate their terminology concerning the Gospel of God. The mixture of terms sets forth the substance of preaching in the early church.⁵ **The emphasis in the Gospel was upon the person and work of Christ.** Their preaching focused upon the kingdom of God, which message focused upon Jesus Christ in His life, His death, and His resurrection. John records the prayer of Jesus (John 17) in which Jesus Himself speaks of His coming as eternal life (John 17:2). On the other hand, **Paul employs many phrases to describe the Gospel of God:** (1) “the gospel” [1 Corinthians 9:16], (2) “Christ crucified” [1:23], (3) “the word of faith” [Romans 10:8], (4)

⁵ For a thorough examination of synonymous expressions to capture the Gospel of Christ, see Hugh Thomson Kerr, *Preaching in the Early Church: The Moore Lectures* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1952), 13-48.

“Jesus Christ as Lord” [2 Corinthians 4:5], (5) “the unsearchable riches of Christ” [Ephesians 3:8], (6) “preach the Word” [2 Timothy 4:2], (7) “it is preached that ‘Christ’ has been raised from the dead” [1 Corinthians 15:12], (8) “proclamation of Jesus Christ” [Romans 15:25], (9) “the message of the Cross” [1 Corinthians 1:18], (10) “to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him” [Galatians 1:16], (11) “preaching the faith” [Galatians 1:23], (12) “preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near” [Ephesians 2:17], and so on.

The writers of the New Testament sought to capture the essence of Christianity with synonymous expressions. The Ephesian Epistle is a classic example of various phrases employed to capture the very heart and core of God’s Gospel. The word *mystery* (μυστήριον, *mystērion*) is utilized in the Book of Ephesians seven times.⁶ In this book, Paul unravels the Gospel of God hidden from the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4). Paul varies his expressions concerning this “mystery,” which is what the Good News is about. In 1:9, Paul refers to this mystery as the “**mystery of his will**.” After having discussed briefly (1:3-14) the essence of this mystery, he calls it the “**administration of God’s grace**” (3:2), which he then describes as the “**mystery**” (3:3).

Paul discussed this mystery in Chapters One and Two in order that these Christians might understand the “**mystery of Christ**” (3:4). Paul continues by saying, “This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel” (3:6). Then, as stated above, he calls this mystery the “**unsearchable riches of Christ**” (3:8) and then immediately calls the “unsearchable riches of Christ” the “**administration of this mystery**” (3:9). Paul closes this short Epistle with the request that he “will fearlessly make known the **mystery of the Gospel**” (6:19). In the Colossian Epistle, Paul cuts away all the underbrush, so to speak, and goes straight to the heart of this mystery. The following citation from Paul is lengthy, but this full quote is necessary in order to grasp the diversity of language employed to capture the very nucleus of the Gospel:

Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.²⁵ I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—²⁶ the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints.²⁷ To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of **this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.**²⁸ We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.²⁹ To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me. I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally.² **My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ,**³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.⁴ I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments.⁵ For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is. (Colossians 1:24—2:1-5)

The above analysis of the varied phraseology to express the Gospel of God reveals the very essence of preaching in the early church, that is to say, apostolic preaching. Apostolic

⁶ Ephesians 1:9; 3:3, 4, 6, 9; 5:32; 6:19.

preaching presented Jesus Christ in His Life, His Death, His Burial, and His Resurrection. The early church made a distinction between preaching (**κήρυγμα**, *kērygma*) and apostolic teaching (**διδασχῆ**, *didachē*). The preaching focused on Christ and His ministry and apostolic teaching focused on ethical instructions, not a so-called worship service with its five prescribed ritualistic acts. The comments of C. H. Dodd (1844-1973, a British Congregational New Testament scholar), are worth citing from his *History and Gospel*:

Reflection on the epistles will show that for all the individuality of the writers and their creative power in the realm of theological and ethical thought their work presupposes everywhere a common tradition of the centre, by which they and their readers are bound, however boldly and freely they may interpret and apply it in the rapidly changing situations of an expanding Church.

Broadly speaking, we may recognize two aspects of this central tradition. On the one hand it is a “**preaching**” or “proclamation” (**κήρυγμα**, *kērygma*) **about God’s action for the salvation of men**, by which the Church was called into existence, and which it announces to all men everywhere as the ground of faith and hope. On the other hand it embodies an ethical ideal for corporate and individual life. The most general term for this is “teaching” (**διδασχῆ**, *didachē*).⁷ (Emphasis mine—bold)

What captured the attention of the non-Christian world of the first century? The *kērygma* was the message that confronted, or challenged, the first-century world. On the other hand, the **διδασχῆ** (*didachē*) implemented apostolic preaching. The *didachē* was the application of one’s response to the *kērygma*, that is to say, the message of life in and through Jesus. Just a perusal of the New Testament writings reveal both standing side-by-side. We discover in the writings of the New Testament that there was a distinction between apostolic preaching and ethical instructions. Again, Dodd calls attention to this difference:

For the early Church, then, to preach the Gospel was by no means the same thing as to deliver moral instruction or exhortation. While the Church was concerned to hand on the teaching of the Lord, it was not by this that it made converts. It was by *kērygma* [the Gospel], says Paul, not by *didachē* [the teachings of Jesus and His Apostles], that it pleased God to save men.⁸

The objective of this in-depth study is to help Christians recapture the very heart of preaching—apostolic preaching. I spent seventeen years in the one-cup and non-Sunday school movement (one of the twenty-five or more divisions within the Churches of Christ). It was not until the very end of my association with this movement that I came to understand biblical preaching. What still goes on within many pulpits of this particular fellowship of God’s people, the early church would not have recognized as the message of salvation, the *kērygma*. Even though this essay mentions this odd movement, nevertheless, the problem is the same in many Churches of Christ. Again, Dodd calls attention to the current problem with the following comments:

⁷ C. H. Dodd, *History and the Gospel* (Digswell Place: James Nisbet and Company Limited, 1938; reprint, London: Bradford and Dickens, 1960), 50-51 (page references are to reprint edition).

⁸ C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching* (New York: Harper & Row, 1936/1964), 8, 1964), 8.

Much of our preaching in Church at the present day would not have been recognized by the early Christians as *kērygma*. It is teaching, or exhortation (*παράκλησις*, *paraklēsis*), or it is what they called *homilia*, that is, the more or less informal discussion of various aspects of Christian life and thought, addressed to a congregation already established in the faith.⁹

A perusal of Paul’s second missionary journey reveals the substance of his preaching. Luke begins his story of Paul’s travels with some editorial comments about the Holy Spirit intervening with missionary work in the province of Asia. He writes: “Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia” (Acts 16:6). Paul experienced a vision following the Spirit’s denial of access to this area. Luke comments on this vision: “After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them” (16:10). Again, we notice the variation in Luke’s description of the Gosepl. In verse 6, he refers to the “preaching of the word” and in verse 10, he calls attention to Paul’s objective—“to preach the gospel.” Upon their arrival, Luke reports the conversion of Lydia and members of her household, he simply states that she and others responded to “Paul’s message” (16:14).

Paul and Silas were later arrested following the casting out of a spirit that enabled a slave girl to predict the future. Prior to Paul casting out this spirit, she followed both men with shouting about their mission: “These men are servants of the Most High God, who are **telling you the way to be saved**” (16:17). We can rest assured that Paul was not proclaiming acappella singing versus instrumental music, grape juice versus wine in the Lord’s Supper, breaking the bread versus pinching the bread, five acts of worship performed in a prescribed manner, how to support missionaries, kitchens in the church building, fellowship rooms for fellowship meals, and so on. Rather, he was telling them what to do “to be saved.” During their incarceration, the Philippian jailor inquired as to what he must do to be saved; he was told to “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household” (16:31).

Following their release from jail, they traveled to Thessalonica (128 miles S.E. of Philippi) to preach Jesus. Upon their arrival, they visited a synagogue and on three Sabbath days “he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³ **explaining and proving that the Christ^a had to suffer and rise from the dead.** “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ,^b” he said” (17:2-3). During the night, Paul and Silas were sent on their way to Berea (41 miles S. W. of Thessalonica). Upon their arrival, they, as usual, went to the synagogue in order to gain an audience to proclaim Christ. Luke says, “**they received the message** with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (17:11). What was the message? Luke again informs Theophilus (1:1) the content of the message with his editorial comments: “When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was **preaching the word of God** at Berea, they went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up” (17:13).

⁹ Ibid., 7, 8.

^a Or Messiah

^b Or *Messiah*

Paul left for Athens (200 miles S. E. of Berea) and preached “the good news about Jesus and the resurrection” (17:18). Then, Paul went to Corinth (40 miles W. of Athens) and proclaimed the word of the Lord. Luke describes his activities this way: “When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul **devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ**^a (18:5). Paul stayed eighteen months in Corinth and taught them “the word of God” (18:11). In teaching the “word of God,” he preached, “Jesus was the Christ.” Paul returned to Caesarea and then went to Antioch. Sometime later, Paul decided to take another tour of evangelism and arrived at Ephesus (19:1). After his encounter with some of the disciples, about twelve in all, in Ephesus (19:1-7), he entered the synagogue and argued persuasively “**about the kingdom of God,**” which study lasted for about three months (19:8). Many refused to believe. As a result of this refusal, he rented the “lecture hall of Tyrannus” and continued his preaching activities for another two years (19:9). Luke says that all the “Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard **the word of the Lord**” (19:10). Following the conversion of many, “**the word of the Lord** spread widely and grew in power” (19:20).

Following Paul’s extended tour in Ephesus, he set out for Macedonia and finally arrived in Greece and spent three months (20:1-6). Later, Paul sailed from Philippi after the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and five days later joined the others at Troas (trō’ās, 20:6). After spending seven days in Troas (20:6), Paul decided to bypass Ephesus and landed at Miletus (37 miles South of Ephesus) and sent for the elders at Ephesus. Upon his arrival, he related how that he had “served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I [Paul] was severely tested by the plots of the Jews” (20:19). He then told the elders that he had “not hesitated **to preach anything** that would be helpful to you but **have taught** you publicly and from house to house” (20:20). What did he preach and teach? Listen once more to Paul as he explains: “I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must **turn to God in repentance** and **have faith in our Lord Jesus**” (20:21).

What was the task that the Lord had given to Paul? Again, we should pay attention to his words: “However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—**the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace**” (20:24). Paul stressed over and over again what he preached: “Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about **preaching the kingdom** will ever see me again” (20:25). Immediately he calls attention to his willingness to proclaim the Gospel of God: “For I have not hesitated **to proclaim to you the whole will of God**” (20:27). In his farewell to the Ephesian elders he says, “Now I commit you to God and to **the word of his grace**” (20:32).

^a Or *Messiah*; also in verse 28

EPISTLES OF PAUL

First Corinthians

As we seek to capture the very essence of the Gospel of God, we turn to one of the earliest written documents, the Epistle to the Corinthians (AD 55). In this epistle, Paul sets forth the kernel of the Gospel: “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance^a: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). The word *Gospel* appears eleven times in this Epistle.¹⁰ Paul presents clearly and briefly the facts surrounding the Good News of God—Jesus lived and died and rose again for the salvation of men and women. In this same chapter (context), Paul calls attention once more to the very heart of his preaching: “Whether, then, it was I or they, this is what we preach (κηρύσσομεν, khrussomen, “we proclaim”), and this is what you believed” (15:11). Paul’s preaching was centered in the proclamation of the historical facts surrounding Christ—His Death, His **Burial**, and His **Resurrection**.

Paul describes the Good News of God by calling attention to God’s initiative in rescuing men and women from His wrath. This is what the Gospel of God and His Son is all about. How could God justify sinful humanity and, at the same time, remain just? Paul explains: “It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption” (1:30). **What was Paul preaching?** He proclaimed Jesus as **our** righteousness, **our** holiness, and **our** redemption. This is the Good News of God’s Way of salvation in and through His Son Jesus. As a result of this mindset, Paul continues to write: “When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God.^c ² For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (2:1-2). What did he preach? Again, one observes that it was “Jesus Christ and him crucified.”

Book of Galatians

Even to the Galatians (AD 48/49), he stresses the substance of his testimony, or preaching, as he concludes this letter to the churches in the province of Galatia: “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which^a the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Galatians 6:14). Paul traveled through Pisidian Antioch, Iconium (71 miles SE of Antioch), Lystra (14 miles south of Iconium), and Derbe (45 miles SE of Lystra). While in Pisidian Antioch, Paul preached the Gospel, which Gospel he refers to as “**this message of salvation**” [ὁ λόγος τῆς σωτηρίας, *ho logos tēs sōtērias*, “the word of this salvation”] (Acts 13:26). He then tells them about the resurrection of Jesus (13:29-30) and then

^a Or *you at the first*

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 1:17; 4:15; 9:12, 14 (two times), 16 (two times), 18, 23; 15:1, 2.

^c Some manuscripts as *I proclaimed to you God’s mystery*

^a Or *whom*

calls this message the “**good news**” [εὐαγγελιζόμεθα, *euangelizometha*, “preach good news”] (13:32). He then proceeded to explain the “good news” of God’s grace this way: “Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that **through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed** to you.³⁹ **Through him everyone who believes is justified** from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses” (13:38-39).

Again, Luke informs Theophilus (see 1:1) that shortly before his departure from this city, the “whole city gathered to hear the **word of the Lord**” [ἀκοῦσαι τὸν λόγον τοῦ, *akousai ton logon tou theou*, “to hear the word of God”] (13:44). Whether we refer to the Death, Burial, and Resurrection as “this message of salvation,” “the good news,” or “word of the Lord,” or “the word of God,” we speak of the same thing—the Good News of God’s way of salvation by believing this message of salvation in and through Christ. Luke again varies his expressions concerning the message of salvation. In Iconium, Luke reports that God confirmed the “message of his grace” (14:3). Later, while in the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and the surrounding country (14:6), they continued, Luke writes, “to preach the good news” (14:7). After great opposition to their message of salvation, they left for Derbe and “preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples” (14:20-21).

Later, Paul wrote to the Galatians about what he delivered to the various churches in his missionary activities. In this short epistle, Paul uses the word *Gospel* twelve times.¹¹ If we wish to really understand Paul’s preaching in the early church, we should reread Acts 13 and 14 along with the Book of Galatians. Galatians is an excellent commentary on what he preached on his first missionary journey. Paul begins this letter with a warning not to preach another way of salvation other than faith in Jesus. Listen to Paul as he issued his warning:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—⁷ which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!⁹ As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! (1:6-9)

The traditional interpretation of Galatians 1:6-9, especially within some Churches of Christ, is not in harmony with the context. The Gospel is not twenty-seven books called the New Testament, nor is the Gospel about how many cups to use in the communion, not about the manner of partaking of the bread (break or pinch), or about acappella singing versus instrumental music. **The Gospel is about Jesus.** Some use these verses to give validity to their disenfranchisement of those who do not walk in the orthodoxy of their particular group. As we read the various religious journals within the numerous splinter groups of the Churches of Christ, we quickly become conscious that **we must distinguish between *inspiration* and *interpretation*.**

We must seek to avoid, as much as possible, preconceived notions as we seek to unravel the intent of the inspired author. If we fail to read the context, we are likely to read our own convictions into the text. Unconsciously, many Christians are just as guilty as were the ones that

¹¹ Galatians 1:6, 7 (two times), 8, 9, 11; 2:2, 5, 7, 14; 3:8; 4:13.

Paul condemned for preaching another gospel. I was brought up in the one-cup and non-Sunday school movement, as stated above, within the Churches of Christ. Many within this movement still preach another Gospel. If Paul were here in person today, he would rebuke many within this movement for not preaching the Gospel he preached. In fact, Paul would not even recognize what is called preaching today as preaching within many of the divisions (about twenty-five) of the Churches of Christ.

If we wish to avoid imposing our thoughts into the text, we must look at the context in order to determine what 1:6-9 means. Paul sets forth his definition of the Gospel in 1:3-4: “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ **who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age**, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵ to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.” The Gospel is about Jesus. Again, Paul reminds the Galatians, “the gospel I preached is not something that man made up” (1:11).

What did Paul preach? Listen once more as he explains: “But when God, who set me apart from birth^a and called me by his grace, was pleased ¹⁶ **to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him** among the Gentiles” (1:15-16). Again, he describes his own ministry as “preaching the faith” that he once tried to destroy (1:23). He then informs the Galatians that when he and Barnabas went up to Jerusalem that he set before the leaders the “gospel” that he preached “among the Gentiles” (2:1-2). Paul wanted to maintain the “truth of the gospel (2:5, 14). The “truth of the gospel” turned on how we are put in a right relationship with God. Pay attention once more as Paul sets forth the “truth of the gospel”:

We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ ¹⁶ know that **a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ**. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be **justified by faith in Christ** and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified. (2:15-16)

Paul keeps driving home the very essence of the Gospel with his arguments. In fact, he summons Abraham to illustrate the very nature of God’s Gospel. He writes:

Consider Abraham: “He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”^{a 7} Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. ⁸ The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and **announced the gospel in advance to Abraham**: “All nations will be blessed through you.”^{b 9} So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. (3:6-9)

Two thousand years before God became Incarnate, God announced the Gospel in advance to Abraham (born 2166 BC). Did God speak to Abraham about a worship service with five rituals to be performed? No! Did He announce to him that the day would come when individuals would only praise Him with accapella singing? No! Did He talk to him about fellowship halls in a church building? No! This announcement concerned Christ who is the

^a Or *from my mother’s womb*

^a Gen. 15:6

^b Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18

Gospel of God. Paul expounds on this announcement this way: “The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say “and to seeds,” meaning many people, but “and to your seed,”^a **meaning one person, who is Christ**” (3:16).

Jesus had earlier told the religious leaders: “Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad” (John 8:56). Just a perusal of Paul’s writings reveals the Gospel he preached. He asked a pointed question to the Galatians about who turned them around from the “truth of the Gospel” and then pointed them back to the very center of the Christian message: “You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified” (Galatians 3:1). The Gospel must not be identified with the narrow sectarian views of the twenty-five or more divisions within the Churches of Christ or within any other denomination. I request each reader of this chapter to reread the Book of Galatians to see if the Gospel is Christ or if it is some odd interpretation(s) of a select group.

Book of Romans

Just as Luke sets forth the essence of Paul’s preaching in the Book of Acts, so Paul sets forth this same preaching in the Book of Romans in a systematic fashion. Even though the Epistle to the Romans does not record the sermons of Paul as listed in the Book of Acts by Luke, nevertheless, we glean from Romans the very heart, or core, of Paul’s preaching as recorded in Acts. Surely, the Gospel, as displayed in this book, represents the preaching of Paul in all of his missionary journeys. Paul opens this epistle (AD 57) with a reference to the Gospel of God:

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the **gospel of God**²— the gospel he **promised beforehand through his prophets** in the Holy Scriptures³ regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David,⁴ and who through the Spirit^a of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God^b by his **resurrection from the dead**: Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 1:1-4)

The Gospel of God is about His Son. In 1:9, Paul refers to the Gospel as “the gospel of his Son.” The very substance, or core, of the Gospel is about the coming of the Messiah as promised by the prophets in order to redeem humanity through His Atonement. In both the Book of First Corinthians and the Book of Romans, we observe the **κήρυγμα** (*kērygma*) formula of the early church—the **Death, Burial, and Resurrection** of Jesus. The Gospel of Christ proclaims Jesus as a living presence, not simply something belonging to the past; He is alive. The Resurrection of Jesus is either a fact or it is a fable. If it is a fact, and it is, it is the greatest fact in history. The Gospel proclaims the Resurrection of Jesus as God’s solemn AMEN to the claims of Christ.

^a Gen. 12:7; 13:15; 24:7

^a Or *who as to his spirit*

^b Or *was appointed to be the Son of God with power*

The word *Gospel* (εὐαγγέλιον, *euangelion*) appears twelve times in the Book of Romans.¹² Just a cursory reading of Romans reveals that Paul sets forth the very heart of the “gospel of his Son” (1:9), which is what he preached wherever he traveled. In 1:1, Paul calls the Gospel the “gospel of God.” This Gospel had to do with the coming of Jesus and His Atonement for the sins of humanity. Paul proclaimed salvation by faith in His Son Jesus. He describes the real meaning of the Gospel this way:

God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement,^a through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—²⁶ he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:25-26).

The Gospel of God sets forth a “righteousness from God, apart from law” (3:21). This “righteousness from God” is only through faith in Jesus (3:22). This “righteousness from God” is available to anyone who accepts Jesus as God’s atonement for the sins of the world. In fact, Paul declares: “Justified **freely** (δωρεάν, *dōrean*) by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (3:24). The English word *freely* (*dōrean*) is translated “without reason” in John 15:25. In this text, Jesus tells His disciples: “They hated me without reason (δωρεάν, *dōrean*).” Paul’s Gospel proclaims that God justifies one “without reason,” that is to say, without works on the part of individuals. God bars all thought of human merit in salvation. Justification is God’s act in and through Jesus. For Paul, works belong with Law, but faith belongs with Christ. The righteousness of the Gospel is solely a property of God. The righteousness of the Gospel comes from God and is revealed through Jesus.

The Gospel that Paul sets forth in the Book of Romans is epitomized in Romans 3:21—4:25. Paul explains the very heart of the Gospel when he writes: “God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood” (3:25). The word *atonement* is from the Greek word ἱλαστήριον (*hilastērion*, “mercy seat”). Just as the “mercy seat” covered the Ark of the Covenant, so Christ covers those who trust in Him for redemption. In order for Paul to drive home the real meaning of the Gospel he proclaimed, he calls forth Abraham to illustrate the central point of God’s Gospel—Abraham justified by faith. In Romans 4, Paul utilizes the word *credit*, or *impute* (λογίζομαι, *logizomai*), eleven times in the fourth chapter. Paul employs this word thirty-four times out of the forty-one occurrences in the New Testament.

Paul goes right to the very core of the Gospel when he writes: “However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is **credited** as righteousness” (4:5). Again, he puts pen to paper: “The words ‘it was **credited** to him’ were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will **credit** righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification” (4:23-25).

An analysis of the fourth chapter of the Book of Romans reveals that Paul argues that justification is not by works (4:4-8), justification is not by circumcision (4:9-12), and

¹² Romans 1:1, 2, 9, 15, 16, 17; 2:16; 11:28; 5:16, 19, 20; 16:25.

^a Or *as the one who would turn aside his wrath, taking away sin*

justification is not by law. How then is one justified? In 4:16-25, he argues persuasively that justification is by faith. The Book of Romans deals with two aeons (ages)—the wrath of God (*ὀργὴ θεοῦ*, *orgē theou*) and the “righteousness from God” (*δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ*, *dikaïosynē theou*). The wrath of God represents the old aeon and the “righteousness from God” **represents the new aeon**. It is through Christ that the “righteousness from God” comes to humanity. Justification for Paul excludes everything except faith in Jesus. The righteousness of God is only given “in Christ.” Faith does not exclude God’s action. The essence of justification is the forgiveness of sin. **The old aeon is the age of spiritual death, but the new aeon is the age of spiritual life**. This is what the Gospel of God is all about.

In Chapter 10 of Romans, Paul captures the essence of his thought in Chapters 1—9. Paul rebukes the Jews for not submitting themselves to “**God’s righteousness**” (10:3). This righteousness that Paul discusses in this chapter is **the righteousness of the new aeon**. This righteousness centers on the finished work of Christ upon Calvary, that is to say, the doing and dying of Jesus. This righteousness from God is external from humanity. In other words, this righteousness is imputed (**credited**) to one who puts his or her trust in Jesus as Lord. The righteousness that Paul addresses in this chapter is not personal holiness or even correct doctrine. Paul states that the Jews refused Jesus as the means of obtaining righteousness. In fact, Paul stresses it this way: “But not all Israelites accepted the good news, For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed our message?’” (10:16). The KJV translates this verse: “But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Esaias [Isaiah] saith, Lord, who hath believed our report?” To “**obey the gospel**” is to accept Jesus as Lord. Pay attention to Paul as he summarizes his previous thoughts:

For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, ¹³ for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”^g ¹⁴ How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? ¹⁵ And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”^h ¹⁶ But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our message?”ⁱ ¹⁷ Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. ¹⁸ But I ask: Did they not hear? Of course they did: (10:12-18)

APPEAL TO REPENTANCE FOLLOWING THE MESSAGE OF SALVATION

Jesus began His ministry with proclaiming the Good News of God (Mark 1:14), but this proclamation concerning the nearness of God’s kingdom also called for repentance (1:15a). Jesus urged the hearers to “**Repent and believe the good news**” (1:15b). The **κήρυγμα** (*kērygma*), or message about the Good News of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus always closes with an appeal for repentance. After Peter proclaimed the Good News about Jesus and

^g Joel 2:32

^h Isaiah 52:7

ⁱ Isaiah 53:1

His kingdom, he, too, called for repentance. Observe the following comments recorded by Luke: “Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’³⁹ The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:38-39). Peter calls for repentance and baptism; and, with repentance and baptism, he offers forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit as a gift.

Following the Day of Pentecost, Peter addresses a crowd and calls attention to the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus (3:14-15). When we respond to God’s way of salvation, He demands a change in our external behavior (this is what repentance means). God sent His Son to redeem humanity, and, at the same time, to turn individuals away from a life of sin. Again, pay attention to Luke as he presents the words of Peter to Theophilus: “When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you **by turning each of you from your wicked ways**” (3:26). Repentance is a gift from God. With the coming of Jesus, God offers repentance and forgiveness of sins. Peter explains these two concepts to the religious leaders:

We must obey God rather than men!³⁰ The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree.³¹ God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel.³² We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.” (5:29-32)

It is “in” and “through” Jesus that God offers repentance as a gift, which gift results in forgiveness. Without the gift of repentance from God, we would be eternally lost. It is God’s gift; it is not a work whereby we earn our salvation. With the coming of Jesus, we are confronted with two aspects of God’s kingdom—the **κήρυγμα** (*kērygma*), which is a declaration of what God does for us, and, on the other hand, the **διδασχῆ** (*didachē*) is that which embodies an ethical ideal for our lives. With the announcement of the message of salvation, we discover that this response demands a change in our ethical conduct. Just a casual reading of the Epistles of Paul reveals the ethical ideas set forth in the Christian communities. Paul’s epistles are generally found in two parts: theological and ethical. The preaching of the early church is referred to as preaching “the Gospel of Christ” (Mark 1:1). On the other hand, the teaching is given as “the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2).

Mark begins his Gospel with the Gospel: “The beginning of the **gospel** about Jesus Christ (**τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ**, *to euangelion Iēsou Christou*), the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). Paul closes his Epistle to the Romans with the following comments about the Gospel: “So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum [īl-īr’ī-kūm], I have fully proclaimed the **gospel** of Christ” [**τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ Χριστοῦ**, *to euangelion tou Christou*] (Romans 15:19). He also writes to the churches in the province of Galatia:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—⁷ which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the **gospel** of Christ (**τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ Χριστοῦ**, *to euangelion tou Christou*). (Galatians 1:6-7)

The Gospel is about His Life, His Death, His Burial, and His Resurrection. Yet, His teachings about, prophecy and its fulfillment, ethical conduct, and relationships are to be taught as coming from Him. As stated above, the “law of Christ” is associated with the *διδασχὴ* (*didachē*), which teaching embodies an ethical ideal for our lives. In Paul’s letter to the Galatians, he speaks of the law of Christ: “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ (*τὸν νόμον τοῦ Χριστοῦ*, *ton nomon tou Christou*) [Galatians 6:2]. If we wish to interpret the “law of Christ” correctly, we must consult the context. The law of Christ has to do with love for one another. Jesus speaks to His disciples about this law: “**My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.**”¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command” (John 15:12-13). John, too, writes about this command, or law of Christ, from Jesus:

We love because he first loved us.²⁰ If anyone says, “I love God,” yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.²¹ **And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.** (1 John 4:21)

When we are “in Christ,” we are members of Christ’s body, not simply someone who has his or her name on a so-called church roll. For us, social relationships are not what they were before conversion. We are transformed by being placed into the context of the Christian society. We are, spiritually speaking, no longer in the flesh, but in Christ. We are now to imitate Christ in our daily walk. Paul tells the Corinthians: “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). Again, to the Thessalonians he writes: “You became **imitators of us and of the Lord;** in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 1:16). When we respond to the Gospel of God, this rebirth demands a change in our external behavior—a behavior that imitates Christ. This is a forgotten teaching of Jesus, a teaching that He told the disciples to teach after making them disciples (Matthew 28:18-20). Paul deals with the spirit of toleration for differences on doctrinal matters in his Roman Epistle. Listen to him as he goes to the very heart of what it means to love one another:

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.² Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.³ For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.”⁴ For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.⁵ May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus,⁶ so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁷ Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. (Romans 15:1-7)

Paul sets forth in this section of Scripture the “law of Christ” that he writes about to the Galatians (6:2). When we put on Christ, we are to abandon the vices of the world and reorient our moral standards that bring honor and glory to God (see Romans 1:18-32). To illustrate the virtues of the new life, we should look at the following three different texts:

And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. ¹⁵ Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else. ¹⁶ Be joyful always; ¹⁷ pray continually; ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. (1 Thessalonians 5:14-18)

Keep on loving each other as brothers. ² Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. ³ Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering. (Hebrews 13:1-3)

Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. ⁹ Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. (1 Peter 3:8-9)

The "law of Christ" is not about individual communion cups, grape juice versus wine in the Communion, breaking the bread versus pinching the bread, kitchens in the church building, instrumental music versus accapella singing, Sunday school, and so on. Christians arrive at such conclusions by torturing, though not deliberately, the words of the Holy Spirit. Because of traditions handed down from one generation to another generation, Christians oftentimes confuse the teachings, or interpretations, of the expositor with the teaching of the Bible. We need to recapture the Gospel of the early church and the teachings of the early church. The teachings are more ethical in nature, that is to say, holiness in living, which holiness is the basic characteristic of one who belongs to the Messianic Community. The epistles of Paul expound the implications of the Gospel in our lives. The epistles are addressed to those who are already Christians.¹³ The life of every believer is to be a life lived in God's world and in God's sight (see Matthew 5:13-16). Another citation from Paul explains what God desires from His people:

At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. ⁴ But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ **he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.** He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that, **having been justified by his grace,** we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. ⁸ This is a trustworthy saying. **And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good.** These things are excellent and profitable for everyone. (Titus 3:3-8)

¹³ See Frances Young, *The Theology of the Pastoral Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) for a thorough treatment of the ethical content of the Pastoral Epistles as set forth by Paul. This is one of the most exhaustive and thorough studies that I have read dealing with ethical instructions to believers.

CONCLUSION

The preaching in the early church focused upon Jesus' Death, Burial, and Resurrection for salvation. It is in this vein that Paul, as he awaited execution in Rome, expresses his farewell thoughts to Timothy: "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal" (2 Timothy 2:8). Peter, too, toward the close of his ministry, wrote his First Epistle (AD 66) to encourage Christians to praise God for this living hope. He writes:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, ¹¹ trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. ¹² It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things. (1 Peter 1:1-12)

The New Testament documents reveal that the Gospel of God focused upon the Death, Burial, and Resurrection of Christ. An examination of the Gospels by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John makes known that Jesus is the Gospel of God. The Book of Acts brings to light that the sermons proclaimed had Christ at their very center. The books of Romans and First Corinthians also unveil the very heart of the message of Christianity. What is proclaimed from many pulpits today does not harmonize with the preaching in the early church. This study is written with the desire to call Christians back to the very heart and core and essence of God's Gospel for a lost and dying world. The Gospel is about Jesus tasting death for the sins of men and women. God revealed Himself in the Christ.

This Divine revelation of God is seen on the Cross of Jesus. The Cross is the sign of the Christian faith. In the message of the Gospel, Christ is the center. Jesus is the window through whom one sees God the Father. Jesus is the Word from eternity (the other side). Christianity is summed up in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The Word that became flesh is the Word of Grace, which grace brings with it life, light, and peace. If one ignores the wrath of God, there will be no understanding of the central conception of the Gospel of God (see Romans 1:18-32; 5:1-21). **The Gospel of God is a movement from God to humanity.** We who believe "in" and "accept" God's divine acts—Jesus' Incarnation, Death, and Resurrection—receive eternal life. The Gospel is about God's assault upon the world of sin. God is love. God's nature is revealed in His Son Jesus. **It is in Jesus that God's love breaks through His wrath against the sins of humanity.** Once more, we ask: What did the early church preach?