

What Is to Be Done?

Acts 21:17–26

April 14, 2002

“What then is to be done?” That is the question. What is to be done in the face of changing circumstances, different cultures, and divergent understandings of the gospel? How can we share Jesus Christ with people different from us? How can we share Jesus Christ in new and fresh ways with people very much like us? How can we make the gospel heard? What is to be done?

If the question stood by itself, it would pose immense difficulties. There is always the danger that the gospel would be lost in translation. There is always the fear that substance would be affected by a change in form. But the question, “What then is to be done?”, does not stand alone. Instead, the question of what we are to do stands within the always prior context of what God has already done. Therein lies all the difference. The good news of today’s reading resides in this deep background of what God has already done for us. What we do now is just implementation.

When the Apostle Paul arrived at Jerusalem, he was gladly received by the members of the church, then he went into the city to see James, and all the elders were present. “After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified God.” Here is the foundation: Paul told them about what God had done. That is always the content of the gospel. God called us by name before the foundation of the world. God made us for himself. God sent his only Son to redeem us. God raised his Son from the dead. God reclaims us as his very own. This is what God has done for us.

The problem, oddly enough, was not that Paul had come to yet another new and different people, but that he had come home to his own people. Paul had spent his preaching career away from home, establishing churches in the major urban centers of the Empire. Through his ministry, Christianity was lifted beyond the confines of Judaism and carried into the Gentile world. Now he had come home and found Jewish Christians. They had been told lies about his ministry and teachings. They were ready to believe that he had abandoned the faith, stretched it beyond recognition, and lost the gospel in order to gain the Greeks. What then was to be done? How could he reach them? On the basis of the wise advice of the elders, Paul publicly fulfilled the religious obligations of his own Judaism without denying or contradicting his Christian faith. This should have satisfied all who were concerned.

What is the point of this exercise for us? The church is always faced with the question of what is to be done. What are we to do in regard to worship, mission, evangelism, Christian education, fellowship, congregational care, stewardship, and on and on? In particular, in a time of massive cultural shifts, international travel, instantaneous communication, the demise of modernity, and the rise of post-modernity, we are faced with the very difficult question of what is to be done to carry the good news of Jesus Christ to people in this new and different world. Unlike Paul, we are not going back home. Instead, we are facing new challenges. Paul had the advantage of knowing what to do, and of having good advice. We have the disadvantage of having to discover what to do. But both Paul and we find ourselves having to do something different from what we have been accustomed to doing. How can we do that, not only without losing the gospel, but precisely in order to maintain and promote the gospel?

We live in a new world. The ground has shifted below our feet. Our children speak a different language from us. They look at the world differently. They seek worship which is experiential, participatory, image rich, and community building (Leonard Sweet, lecture at Gathering VI of the Presbyterian Coalition, Orlando, Florida, October 2001). They are wary of institutions, though more open to movements. So, even apart from the imperative for foreign mission, how can we best spread the good news to our neighbors and to the next generation right here at home? How can we love people enough so that they will know the love of God?

For starters, we need to remember that these important questions are set within the context of a prior and more important reality. They are set within the context of what God has already done. So, first, we remember and proclaim what God has already done for us. Then everything else falls into place. What has God done? God has come to us in Jesus Christ. God has forgiven and taken away our sin. God has promised us eternal life. And God has called us together into a new, international, multi-racial community of praise, worship, fellowship, nurture, service, and mutual love. This is the good news we believe. This is the faith we proclaim. This is the good hope by which we are made brave to face each new day. This is worth sharing, even if we have to learn new words to say it.

Having acknowledged the always prior deeds of God, we also realize that what we do in regard to implementation continues to be important. We had over one-hundred visitors here on Easter partly because members invited family and friends to church. On Wednesday night of this week, we learned of one of our members inviting six or seven of his co-workers to church. Earlier in the week, I learned from a colleague of mine that she had an entire first grade class worship last Sunday at the church she serves. How did that happen? One of her church members, in the first grade, told his whole class that they needed to come to his church. So they did, along with their teacher. Perhaps the single most important thing we can do as church members is to come to church and be faithful in our attendance and participation. You know that, and I know that. But surely a close second would be for us to invite and bring people to church with us. How else are they to hear the gospel? How else are they to meet Jesus Christ? How else are they to know our love? Inviting and bringing people to church is a simple thing. Everyone can do it. And yet, it is profoundly important both to the proclamation of the gospel and to the edification of the church. If each member would bring a new member just once a year, we would double in size every year.

Of course, this encouragement to invite people raises important questions. Is the gospel really for all people? Is it meant for people who do not look like, dress like, or talk like us? Well, yes it is. So, what is to be done? We are to preserve, maintain, promote, and proclaim the content of the gospel. That is to say, we are to bear witness to Jesus Christ. And, at the same time, we are to accommodate the form, the shape, the style, the language, and the means of communication to the people among whom we find ourselves and whom we are trying to reach. In fact, to fail to do so would be to fail to preserve the gospel, for if it is not proclaimed anew in each generation, it is lost.

One of the major accomplishments of the Protestant Reformation was the reclaiming of the content of the gospel as classically understood by the church and bringing it forward into its own day. And one of the reasons that accomplishment became a major advance for Christianity was their insistence on proclaiming that gospel in the language of the people in each country. We take it for granted that we are able to worship in English today. We hardly notice it, let alone think about it. But, it has not always been so. For centuries, worship was led in a language the

people did not know. The Reformers realized that the gospel should be proclaimed in the language of the people. Only so could they meet and know Jesus Christ. Only so could they hear of the grace of God. Only so could they receive the forgiveness of sin. Only so could they learn of the promise of eternal life. Only so could the classically understood content of the gospel be communicated to the people who needed to hear it. So the precedent is set for translation into the language, the idiom, and the understanding of the people.

What is the world in which we find ourselves today? What is the culture? What is the language, the idiom, and the understanding? We do not want to abandon or amend the gospel, but how can we best share it? How can we reach out to those around us? Who can advise us?

For centuries, when life was hard and short, the gospel was proclaimed primarily in terms of the promise of eternal life. It was the answer to the question of death. Later, perhaps when more people were living longer, the question was raised as to how a sinner could stand before the righteous God. Partly in response to that question, the gospel was proclaimed primarily in terms of the forgiveness of sin. Even later, in the twentieth century, the question of sin seemed not to exercise many people. But with the rise of existential philosophy, the question of meaning did. It weighed heavily upon people. In the emptiness of the modern, scientific view of the world, how did life have any meaning? And what was that meaning? Partly in response to that question, the gospel was proclaimed primarily in terms of Christ providing meaning to life, particularly through his suffering and sacrifice being a model for our own suffering service.

Even with these shifts of emphasis and articulation, it is not the case that these ways of proclaiming the gospel are mutually exclusive. Instead, they enrich our understanding of the work of Jesus Christ. We continue to preach the gospel in terms of providing meaning for life, in terms of providing for the forgiveness of sin, and in terms of the promise of eternal life. And yet, the question has shifted again. Most people live long and full lives today. Few people are troubled by sin to the extent of being incapacitated by a guilty conscience. And instead of being plagued by a dearth of meaning, it seems to me that post-modernity has cursed us with a multiplicity of meanings, with multiple causes making their claims upon us. The problem is no longer meaninglessness, let alone sinfulness or mortality. The problem is fragmentation, the multiplication of claims for meaning and allegiance. We are being pulled in a thousand different directions, individually, societally, nationally, and internationally. In our day, the gospel might faithfully and usefully be understood and proclaimed in terms of that which unifies, that which holds our lives together in one piece, and that which can unify our families, communities, and world. Is that of interest to you? Yes, Jesus Christ provides for the meaning of our lives, the forgiveness of our sins, and the promise of eternal life. He also provides a respite from all that tears at us, a center in the midst of all that beckons and distracts us, an anchor in the storm, a north star in the night, a friend who will not desert us, a focal point in the confusion, a magnet which attracts us, a compass which steers us, a still, small voice in the midst of the noise. Is your life hectic? Is it desperate? Are you going too many ways all at once? Jesus Christ is the center of human history. He is the key to the universe. And he is the center of your life, whether you realize it or not. What then is to be done? We are to proclaim the gospel to address the human concerns of the day so that all might hear and believe. We tell the ancient good news in this new situation.

Moreover, we do it with every tool available to us. The Reformation advanced on the wings of the new technology of the day: the printing press. Bibles were not only translated into the language of the people but also printed for them. Sermons were not only preached but also

distributed. Lessons were not only taught but also printed and sent around the world. Again, the precedent has been set. Grace Covenant has been a leader in the use of new technology in the service of the gospel, having broadcast its services over the radio since January 1, 1924, just two years after radio was invented. Today we use also not only the press and the radio, but also the Internet, web sites and E-mail. We want to press forward with this. But technology is not enough. This is the means for distribution. But we still have to proclaim the message in the language of the people and the culture of the day.

What then is to be done? First, we are to remember and to proclaim what God has already done for us in Jesus Christ. This is the foundation of everything we are about. Second, we are to love the people. Even as God has loved us, so are we to love the people. Because God has sent his Son for them and for us, we are united through the work of Christ. Third, we are to maintain the gospel precisely by proclaiming it in new and exciting ways which make sense to the people to whom we are reaching out and which help them to make sense out of the rest of life. To do any less would be to fail them, to fail gospel, and to fail our risen Lord, Jesus Christ. But to do this well, to do this correctly, to translate the gospel into a new idiom, would be to honor the gospel, to love our neighbor, and to exalt Jesus Christ. What then is to be done?

*To God Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
be all praise, honor, and glory
now and forever! Amen.*

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