

The essentials of Christian work

Acts 3

Introduction

So far the picture drawn of the early church has been idyllic. All the members received forgiveness and the Holy Spirit, and were committed to worship, care and evangelism. Love, joy and peace reigned. But it was not long before the first storm came, the first of many. The Devil does not let Christian work and witness alone for long. The Christian and the church zealous for God soon feel satanic reaction.

The story begins innocently enough. A remarkable miracle is performed, but it leads to the first arrest and the first persecution. Peter and John were in the Temple at the hour of prayer. They see a cripple who was lame from birth. He was over 40 years old, permanently crippled. He was laid daily at Beautiful Gate of the Temple. The main entrance to the precincts, from the Court of the Gentiles. Made of Corinthian brass, seventy-five feet high, with huge double doors. Beggars hoped those entering would be particularly generous.

When Peter and John were asked for help, they explained that they had neither silver nor gold, but something far better. They were able to be channels through whom the risen Lord could bring complete healing. So often empty pockets may go along with true wealth. Peter took the cripple by the right hand, as he had seen Jesus take Jairus's daughter, and lifted him up. The cripple's feet and ankles were strengthened, and he not only stood but also walked, leaped and praised God as he entered the Temple.

The whole episode of the miracle performed on this totally incurable man led to much wonder and amazement by the people. It was another thing the risen Lord continued to do through His church after the ascension. **The lame man will leap like a deer** (Isaiah 35:6).

We are going to learn some lessons about Christian service from this passage. We are disciples at work for the Lord. What are the essentials of Christian work?

The place for cooperation and team work

It was not one disciple, but two, who were the agents for the Lord – Peter and John. They were often together. They prepared the Last Supper together (Luke 22:8). They went to the tomb together on Resurrection morning (John 20:2). They were sent by the church in Jerusalem to investigate the work in Samaria (Acts 8:14).

We often see the principle of cooperation and teamwork demonstrated in the New Testament. When the Lord sent out His disciples, He sent them in pairs. In Acts we read of Paul and Barnabas. Then after their disagreement over Mark, we read of Barnabas and Mark, and Paul and Silas (Acts 16:39,40). So also in the Old Testament – Moses and Aaron, Caleb and Joshua, Jonathon and his armour-bearer, Ezra and his

supporters. How valuable to have a co-worker, so that one can assist, encourage, and comfort the other. It is so reassuring to know someone is with you.

Co-workers are valuable also because gifts may vary. Peter was a man of action, whereas John was more quiet and thoughtful. One outspoken, and one more gracious. Partnership in Christian work. Many members but one body. According to our gifts, we are to work together and cooperate. None has all the gifts; none can be self-sufficient, omni-competent. Spurgeon said he was glad he was a minister of a large church, for he did not have enough gifts to be minister of a small one.

There is also value of plurality of elders within the church. Life can be very lonely on your own. It is a pity if independence, shyness, self-sufficiency or pride gets in way of cooperation. We rob ourselves and we rob the fellowship.

Regular times of fellowship with God

Peter and John went to the Temple at the hour of prayer, i.e. the ninth hour, 3pm. There were three special times of prayer for Jews - morning, noon and towards evening. **Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress and he hears my voice** (Psalm 55:17). Immediately after evening sacrifice was offered, prayer was offered in the Temple and in many other places, e.g. Cornelius, who was a God-fearer, prayed at 3pm.

Prayer was efficacious wherever offered. But doubly precious if offered in the temple courts. N.B. the Apostles still kept up the customs and habits in which they were trained. It was the hour of prayer, and Peter and John went to the Temple to observe it. These men knew the importance of attendance at the Lord's house, and an orderly prayer life. They no doubt prayed all day, but also had set times.

Because of the infirmity of a weak human nature, it is good to have set times and places. Some people say there is no need to be disciplined in this, since they can pray anytime, anywhere. They have great self-confidence, but the question is do they actually pray anytime, anywhere? Most of us are very feeble and ordinary men and women, and need discipline and regularity. Clock needs to be wound up regularly else it never seems to work at all.

Danger of those who constantly travel or work shifts. They have particular difficulty here, and need to be watchful else they soon decline spiritually. At regular times, the inward man needs to be renewed every day. By prayer we acknowledge our complete helplessness and total dependence on God. The church without a prayer meeting is only a religious or social centre – devoid of any hope of doing spiritual good. We will never speak to men for God till we have learnt to speak to God for men.

Knowledge of the Scriptures

Peter and John's Scriptures would have been our Old Testament. Peter's sermon (Acts 3:12-26) showed his grasp of these Scriptures, and he explained how they had been fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ. So many prophecies and so much foretelling had its realization in God's Messiah and Saviour of the World.

Peter did not merely have the general thrust of the Old Testament, but knew it in detail, quoting from many parts of it. He taught them that Jesus was the Davidic king foretold by Samuel (2 Samuel 7:12), the seed of Abraham (Genesis 12:3), a prophet like unto Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15).

Above all, Jesus was the Servant of the Lord (Acts 3:13,26; 4:27,30). The same title was used of David, but Jesus was the Servant of the Lord in a very special way. Peter takes us right back to the four servant songs of Isaiah, the greatest of which is Isaiah 53, reminding us of the Servant of the Lord, the Redeemer, man of sorrows, who has borne our grief, was wounded for our transgressions, and the one on whom the Lord has laid our iniquity, the righteous servant who justified many. Death could not hold Him (Psalm 16:8; Acts 2:24,27,31), and now He is exalted at God's right hand (Psalm 110:1; Acts 2:34,35). He is the one through whom the Spirit was poured out (Joel 2:28; Acts 2:16), and the rejected stone who is now the head of the corner (Psalm 118:22; Acts 4:11).

Comprehensive testimony to Jesus – rejected by men and vindicated by God, in fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy. So here are men who knew the Old Testament and saw how it related to Jesus Christ. They were thoroughly familiar with the Word.

We cannot know the Bible too well; we cannot be over-familiar with the contents. One of the tragedies about so many versions of the Bible is that it discourages Bible memorization. As a result, few enough are under Christian influence nowadays, and few of the few are growing up remembering the Bible. The effect of all that may not be seen at present, but thirty years hence it will be noticeable. How we need to prepare for the future, to lay a solid foundation. Crucial that Christian workers should be able to wield the Sword of the Spirit wisely and effectively.

Humility

After the cripple was cured, everyone thought Peter and John were responsible, and they were filled with wonder and amazement. Peter and John were quick to say it was nothing to do with them. They told the people not to marvel at them, for they had no power or holiness that could cause a man to walk. They had done it in His name – in all that Christ is – His nature, His incarnation, life, death, Resurrection and His work. It was only through faith in that name that this man had been made strong and fully restored.

The Lord is the worker. We are tools and instrument, and nothing more. We must never magnify the channel, but merely point to Christ. The greatest danger to any Christian worker, whether preacher, elder, deacon, youth leader, is pride. Taking credit, when the glory is Christ's alone. We are in constant danger of forgetting, **What do you have that you did not receive?** (1 Corinthians 4:7).

The great danger of the church is to trust in a man, his gifts, skills and experiences. Must not forget, **One man plants, another waters, but it is God who gives the increase** (1 Corinthians 3:6,7). Sadly some churches do not believe that, and it is one of the root causes of prayerlessness. We can provide the wood, but all is in vain unless the fire of God falls.

Andrew Bonar, after a ministerial jubilee celebration meeting, was asked if it was not indeed “a grand meeting”. He replied, “Yes, but I think there was too much praise of man and too little of God. I never thought I did any more than draw the water and let the flock drink.” What fools ministers and preachers are when they are filled with pride and let their heads be turned by flattery. And what fools churches are when they put confidence in men – with their feet of clay, weaknesses, and total spiritual inability. **Apart from me you can do nothing** (John 15:5). The branch cannot bear fruit by itself. The secret is in the vine and not in the branch. The skill is in the hand, not in the tool.

Ability to present the Gospel

Peter and John could not give from a full purse, but they could speak from full hearts. They knew exactly the problems in people’s lives and they knew the exact remedy. The problem was sin; the remedy was Christ. The responsibility of the Christian is not to persuade men to be religious, or to get them to church, but to bring them to Christ.

Peter started by pointing out they were wrong with God. They had handed Christ over to be killed, they disowned Him before Pilate, they wanted a murderer rather than Christ, and they killed the prince and author of life. But God had overturned their verdict, and raised Jesus Christ – showing up how wrong they were for fighting and rebelling against God and His Messiah. Their guilt and rejection means they are in a serious situation, guilty of rebellion and in danger. Essence of sin is going own way, rejecting God, despising Christ, saying no to His claims.

Then Peter gives clear direction about salvation – **repent then, and turn to God** (Acts 3:19). Repentance is to forsake the sins we loved before, and show that we are in earnest by not doing them any more. The second step is to turn to the Lord, seeking salvation in Him.

A three-fold promise follows – (i) sins will be wiped out, washed away, obliterated, (ii) times of refreshing from the Lord, rest, relief, refreshment for our spirits, peace, liberty and joy after conversion, and (iii) the promise of the Lord’s return when He will restore everything, as He promised, nature will be liberated from bondage to decay and pain. Finally new heaven and new earth.

Peter and John did not preach themselves, but preached Christ Jesus the Lord. They were witnesses of those things. What was on the label was what was in the jar.

Conclusion

Christian work involves cooperation, a strong devotional life, a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures, humility and an ability to present Christ.