

Reclaiming the Focus of the 1st Century Church



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ABSTRACT: *The church of the 21st century frequently looks to the example of its predecessor found described in the book of Acts. Even though the early church experienced numerous difficulties including church discipline, persecution, and forging procedures for representing Christ properly, the present-day church looks back with a yearning for equal effectiveness missionally. Some will define effectiveness by the numbers of people added to the church. Others will counter with observable results including the countless healings, exorcisms, and bold preaching. Yet, today's church is often drawn to a social agenda. One cannot sustain a complaint that a social agenda is excluded from the life of the fledgling church. Luke wrote that "there was not a needy person among them" (Acts 4:34 NASB). This was the life of the church but what of their missional efforts? Did the early church also care for the community's needs and why? This paper will explore what may have motivated the 1st century church that could be missing in the 21st century. The investigation of scripture will go beyond the book of Acts. It will largely touch on not only the teaching but also the habits of the church which could be chosen as a model for the present day and the future church. An important question to be answered is, "has the church today replaced the foundational focus held by the early church and if so, is there a legitimate reason for doing so?"*

KEYWORDS: *God, Jesus Christ, Church, Twenty-first Century, Missional, Pastoral, Church Trends*

Reclaiming a focus infers that what once was driving the church has been lost or at least is not active as it was in the first century. This focus can quickly be understood as witnessing to the coming of Jesus Christ.

The first to focus on Jesus the Son is God the Father. "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things through whom also He made the world" (Hebrews 1:1-2). John Stott writes, "supremely, he spoke in his Son, his 'Word . . . made flesh', and in his Word's words, whether spoken directly or through his apostles."² Stott also proclaims, "We must speak what he has spoken."³

The mission of God's people, writes Christopher J. H. Wright, is "to make God known."⁴ A survey of the New Testament will show that the early church was prolific at doing so. This article will highlight the select instructions and examples given by the writers of scripture to fulfill the words of Jesus when he prophesied that, "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Speaking of Acts 1:8, Wright states that

this probably refers primarily to the special place of the original disciples/apostles as eyewitnesses of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus himself. However, I was taught (rightly I think) that even

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² John R. W. Stott, *The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), 15.

³ Stott, *The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*, 15.

⁴ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 164.



though the apostolic witness had a unique function in authenticating New Testament Christianity, witnessing to Christ was something that went beyond the apostles. All following generations of believers were enlisted in the ongoing task of bearing witness to the same Lord Jesus Christ, in whom they had come to believe through apostolic witness.⁵

The imperative to be witnesses supersedes the foundational directives to love and serve others since to witness of Christ is the fulfillment of love and service. When witnessing of Christ, the Christian is both obedient and worshipful. The exaltation of Jesus Christ will always result in changed lives as well as opposition for it is in the name of Jesus that lives are changed.

In *Preach the Word* Greg Haslam wrote,

The era of the Spirit had commenced, and church growth began to snowball according to Acts 4:4. The apostles preached incessantly – so much so that the main complaint voiced against them by the authorities was that they had ‘filled Jerusalem’ with their teaching. Dramatic church growth and equally dramatic hostility as a result – were not the result of inter-faith festivals, the creative arts, jumble sales or Christian rock concerts. It was through persistent preaching, day by day in the temple courts, or visiting house to house. They never ceased proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.⁶

What shook the first century following the ascension of Jesus was not what his followers were doing as much as what they were focused on. Simply put, they had one message and it was Jesus Christ the risen Son of the living God. Yet the church in subsequent centuries seemed to lose this focus settling on token acts that are kind but lack the stated mission of the church which is to make followers of Jesus. (Matthew 28:19)

J. Michael Walters states that “We have too commonly today a church grown adept at accommodating to and being shaped by the culture around it. Whenever the church stops keeping Jesus as the absolute central focus of its life and ministry, such accommodation is virtually inevitable. The church adopts values antithetical to the Kingdom it has been commissioned to expand.”⁷ We will find scripture not only opposing this view but modeling a specific focus on Jesus Christ.

What follows is an examination of select passages that reveal focused and obedient followers of Jesus Christ. Comparatively speaking, observations will include how out of focus we may be in the twenty-first century.

A First Century Model

Acts 2:22-32

Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know— this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power. For David says of Him, ‘I saw the Lord always in my presence; For He is at my right hand, so that I will not be shaken. ‘Therefore, my heart was glad, and my tongue exulted; Moreover, my flesh also will live in hope; Because You will not abandon my soul to Hades, nor allow Your Holy One to undergo decay. ‘You have made known to me the ways of life; You will make me full of gladness with Your presence.’

⁵ Wright, *The Mission of God’s People*, 164.

⁶ Greg Haslam, “Preach the Word,” in *Preach the Word: The Call and Challenge of Preaching Today*, edited by Greg Haslam (Lancaster: Sovereign World Limited, 2006), 35.

⁷ J. Michael Walters, “The Church Jesus Builds Is Incarnational” in *The Church Jesus Builds: A Dialogue on the Church in the 21st Century*. ed. Joseph Coleson (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007), 35.

Brethren, I may confidently say to you regarding the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. And so, because he was a prophet and knew that God had sworn to him with an oath to seat one of his descendants on his throne, he looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that He was neither abandoned to Hades, nor did His flesh suffer decay. This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses.

From the beginning of the church Peter was present. He experienced the coming of the Spirit in the upper room and in a powerful discourse, that a mere fisherman could not possibly present without much preparation and coaching, he presented Jesus Christ. In this passage, Peter refers to Jesus nine times. The immediate focus at the event of Pentecost was Jesus Christ.

Craig Keener states, “That Peter opens his exposition with mention of Jesus sets the tone for what will follow”.⁸ Keener provides an outline to Peter’s discourse including, Appealing to Jesus’ Signs (2:22), Jesus’s Death and God’s Plan (2:23), Jesus as Lord in Light of Scripture (2:25-36), Jesus’ Resurrection (2:25-28), Jesus, Not David, Is the Exalted King (2:29:36).⁹ The focus on Jesus is overt but Keener notices that Peter’s use of the title Lord is distinct.

Lord was a frequent title for pagan deities, but for the earliest Jewish followers of Jesus, it was especially a divine title in the LXX. For Luke, God the Father is Lord (Acts 2:20, 39: 3:19-20, 22; 4:25-26, 29) but Christ also receives this title by exaltation (1:21; 2:36; 4:33; 5:14, 9:1 Rom. 10:9-13; 2 Cor. 4:5; Phil. 2:9-11); Jesus receives faith (Acts 3:16) and prayer (7:59) and is the world’s judge (10:42; 17:31).¹⁰

Acts 5:42

“Every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.”

One of the marks of the infant church is that they focused not on gaining followers or adding numbers by impressing the community. Instead, they taught and preached Jesus as Christ.

More than two thousand years later, we have been tempted to lose the basic emphasis of the church which is to be drawing attention to Jesus Christ. After all, he is “the author and finisher of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2). To truly see the lost won, faith needed to be produced. Not only was and is faith necessary for salvation (John 1:12; 1 Peter 1:9; Romans 10:9), it is the one and only way to please God (Hebrews 11:6). This faith is not in the goodness of the church or the beauty of the church, but simply in who Jesus Christ is.

This verse is found after the apostles were put in prison and told not to “teach in this name” (Acts 5:28). Presumably, they were accused of speaking about Jesus Christ. After being beaten, and told not to continue to spread their teaching, Luke reports that the apostles continued to “preach Jesus Christ” (Acts 5:42).

The council that had the apostles beaten and imprisoned were “cut to the heart” (Acts 5:33). The same phrase is used by those who heard Stephen’s sermon (Acts 7:54). The center of both instances was the teaching and preaching of Jesus Christ.

Granted, the goal of the church is to win people. Missional efforts are to welcome souls into the Kingdom of God, so we hope for positive responses to the teaching and preaching of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, focusing on Jesus Christ will divide the penitent and the rebellious. This should never be a concern for the church. Our first dedication, like the first century church, is to present Jesus Christ to a world that desperately needs his forgiveness.

Warren Wiersbe notes, “the word translated “preach” gives us our English word evangelize, and this is the first of fifteen times it is used in Acts. It simply means “to preach the Gospel, to share the Good News

⁸ Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary vol 1* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 926.

⁹ Keener, *Acts*, 924.

¹⁰ Keener, 922.

of Jesus Christ.”¹¹ He adds, “it was Jesus Christ who was the center of their witness. That was the very name that the Sanhedrin had condemned! The early church did not go about arguing religion or condemning the establishment: they simply told people about Jesus Christ and urged them to trust in Him. “For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord” (2 Cor. 4:5). “Ye shall be witnesses unto Me” (Acts 1:8).”¹²

Acts 8:5, 35

“Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them. Then Philip opened his mouth and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him.”

Previously, we saw that largely, the Jews had rejected the teaching and preaching of Jesus Christ even resorting to threats and even violence. It is conspicuous now that Luke reports Philip proclaiming and preaching Christ to Gentiles. Like Paul, this was not a rejection of presenting the Messiah to the Jews. Philip taking the message of Christ to Samaria and to the Ethiopian eunuch confirms that Jesus Christ is to be taken to all people regardless of ethnicity.

J. B. Polhill notes that “Philip is described as preaching to them ‘the Christ’” (v. 5). The Samaritans had their own messianic viewpoint involving the Taheb. Philip undoubtedly had to lead the Samaritans to a fuller understanding of the true Messiah just as Jesus had to do with the Samaritan woman (John 4:25f.). Similarly, Peter had to set forth the unheard-of concept of a suffering Messiah to the Jewish crowds in Jerusalem (Acts 3:18). This message was power and life is found in the one Philip proclaimed (v. 6).¹³

The church in the twenty-first century is truly missional when it speaks of Jesus Christ to all people whether they are nominal Christians, atheists, seekers, or are practicing a religion that does not recognize Jesus Christ as the one way to the Father. True compassion for others will lead the present-day church to proclaim Jesus Christ.

Later Luke tells the reader that Philip continued to preach Christ. This time, he is telling an Ethiopian Eunuch about Jesus. Polhill summarizes this encounter as “three natural parts: the preparation (vv. 26–29), the witness (vv. 30–35), and the commitment (vv. 36–40).”¹⁴ At the center of their discussion was Jesus.

Acts 9:20-22

“Immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God.’ All those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, ‘Is this not the one who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?’ But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this *Jesus* is the Christ.”

The man who vehemently opposed the preaching and teaching of Jesus Christ not only encountered Christ, but he was also changed into a man who preached the name even in the face of great persecution and suffering. As was previously stated, the message of Jesus did not end with the death of Stephen. God did not give up on Israel.

Not only does Saul now preach Jesus, but he does it in an exceptional way which Polhill states is noteworthy. “Luke described Paul as preaching Christ as ‘Son of God.’ This is the only occurrence of the title in all of Acts, and yet for Paul it was a central concept. In fact, Paul connected the term “Son of God” with his call as an apostle in Gal 1:16 and in Rom 1:1–4.”¹⁵

Luke not only makes mention of Saul arguing with the Jews, but he also states that he proved that Jesus is the Christ. This is of utmost importance. In our Western world, proof is necessary otherwise the message is not taken seriously. One might wonder what proof Saul presented. It is safe to say that Saul,

¹¹ W. W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary Vol. 1*, (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1996), 427-428.

¹² Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 427-428.

¹³ J. B. Polhill, *Acts, Vol. 26* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 214.

¹⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, 214.

¹⁵ Polhill, 239.

who was adept at the Hebrew scriptures showed the Jews that Jesus of Nazareth completely fulfilled the prophecies of the promised Messiah.

Rarely in our time, will people be knowledgeable of the Old Testament and the significance of the Messianic prophecies. Nevertheless, providing the biblical meta narrative will be truly missional. Like in the case of Saul, presenting the fulfillment of prophecy, it will be the ultimate obedience for the present church, and it will certainly draw some to a living faith in Jesus Christ.

Acts 17:1-3

“Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And according to Paul’s custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.’”

Paul’s habit was to go to synagogues where he would do three things. First, he would, according to Luke, reason from Scriptures, second explain the Scripture and third give evidence of Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection. Some responded favorably to Paul proclaiming Christ. Conversely some stirred up, out of jealousy, a mob which resulted in Paul leaving quickly. What Paul did is key,

His communications consisted in the opening and setting forth of two truths to his hearers, in accordance with the Old Testament, first, that, according to the prophecies, it was necessary that the Messiah should suffer and rise again; secondly, that This One, namely Jesus, is the Anointed One. It is certainly the most simple interpretation to regard (with Luther, Bengel [and Hackett]) οὗτος as the subject, and ὁ Χριστός as the predicate, in which case Ἰησ. ὃν ἐγὼ καταγ. ὑμῖν are words that are introduced merely as explanatory of οὗτος.¹⁶

Lenski expands on this theme by stating,

After opening up the Scriptures Paul proceeded to show their fulfillment in Jesus. Here Luke drops into direct discourse: ‘that this One is the Christ (of the Scripture promises), the Jesus whom I on my part (emphatic ἐγὼ) am proclaiming to you.’ Thus the whole story of Jesus was presented in the light of the Messianic prophecies. We follow the same course to this day even for ourselves who are not of Jewish blood. What makes us so everlastingly sure is this prophecy through the ages with its fulfillment in Jesus.¹⁷

Throughout history, the news of the Savior has not always been accepted with cheer. This has not deterred the church through the centuries. The church has long been an enemy to many communities, not because it is destructive or dangerous, rather it is because there is power in proclaiming Christ which is the most powerful threat to the spirits of darkness.

Acts 17:18

“And also, some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. Some were saying, ‘What would this idle babbler wish to say?’ Others, ‘He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,’—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.”

Luke recounts Paul’s experience in Athens specifically when he went to engage in an atmosphere where discussion and debate was celebrated. The Greek philosophers entertained many ideas proudly asserting their broadmindedness. They reasoned that Paul had nothing but little bits of truth, so they patronized him by listening but when Paul spoke of the resurrection of Jesus, some mocked.

Expounding on the cultural environment that Paul encountered, Wiersbe wrote, the Greek religion was a mere deification of human attributes and the powers of nature,” wrote Conybeare and Howson in their classic *Life and Epistles of St. Paul*. “It was a religion which ministered to art and amusement and was entirely destitute of moral power” (pp. 280–281). The

¹⁶ J. P. Lange, et al., *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Acts* (Bellingham: Logos, 2008), 316.

¹⁷ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 693.

Greek myths spoke of gods and goddesses that, in their own rivalries and ambitions, acted more like humans than gods; and there were plenty of deities to choose from! One wit jested that in Athens it was easier to find a god than a man. Paul saw that the city was “wholly given to idolatry.”¹⁸

The 21st century is not unlike what Paul experienced in Athens. Like Paul’s experience, some today will mock the preaching of Jesus and the resurrection. This is of no consequence to believers. Like Paul, we are “tellers” of the truth of who Jesus Christ is.

Wiersbe observes that Paul spoke of “The greatness of God: He is Creator (v. 24), The goodness of God; He is Provider (v. 25), The government of God: He is Ruler (vv. 26–29), The grace of God: He is Savior (vv. 30–34).”¹⁹

Acts 18:4-6

“Paul was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul began devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. But when they resisted and blasphemed, he shook out his garments and said to them, ‘Your blood be on your own heads. I am clean.’”

As was stated earlier, Paul’s habit was to frequent synagogues in numerous locations not only because he was a rabbi²⁰ but also now more so since he had a special message. There he would “testify to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ” (Acts 18:5). Again, the response to Paul was anything but positive. Not only did the Jews oppose him they blasphemed, more than likely the subject of Paul’s talk, Jesus Christ.

Lenski notes that Paul, being a responsible Jew who learned a trade eventually began to hold himself to the Word” (“spirit” in the A. V. is incorrect), inchoative imperfect of the direct middle (R. 808, also W. P., not passive as our versions translate). He began to devote all his time to the Word, applying himself especially to testifying earnestly to the Jews that Jesus is the Messiah. His earnings during the past few weeks enabled him to do this. The Jews were Paul’s special concern; and the issue was whether they would accept Jesus as “the Christ,” the Messiah.²¹

If we were looking to win people by any other means, we would do all we could to impress and draw the outsider into our fellowship but preaching Christ does not result in all accepting the message the church has been given. We are not deterred by this, and neither was Paul. He responded to the rejection of the Jews with rejection. He moved on to the Gentiles with the gospel of Jesus Christ. This does not mean that Paul gave up on the Jews as is borne out by his message to the Roman church. “Brothers and sisters, my heart’s desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation. For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God’s righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (Romans 10:1-4).

Acts 18:28

“When he wanted to go across to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him; and when he had arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, demonstrating by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.”

Apollos, a Jew that was “mighty in Scriptures” (Acts 18:24) refuted the Jews and was able to demonstrate from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ. The focus of the first century Christian was to show others who Jesus Christ was. Followers of Jesus were more concerned with bringing him to the

¹⁸ Wiersbe, 472.

¹⁹ Wiersbe, 474.

²⁰ There is some dispute as to whether Saul of Tarsus was a rabbi but there many who believe that he was since he was often found teaching in synagogues. To prove one way or another is difficult, but we hold to his functioning as a rabbi since he had studied the Hebrew scriptures with Gamaliel the elder.

²¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 748.

forefront of discussion since he is the promised Savior of the world. Although Apollos was not an apostle, he too fulfilled the commission to proclaim Christ.

Wiersbe states that “the only problem was that this enthusiastic man was declaring an incomplete Gospel. His message got as far as John the Baptist and then stopped! He knew nothing about Calvary, the resurrection of Christ, or the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. He had zeal, but he lacked spiritual knowledge (Rom. 10:1–4).”²² He was then instructed by Priscilla and Aquila “the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:26). Undoubtedly, they showed him about Jesus Christ fulfilling the scripture resulting in him “demonstrating by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ” (Acts 18:28).

Acts 26:22-23

“So, having obtained help from God, I stand to this day testifying both to small and great, stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place; that the Christ was to suffer, *and* that by reason of *His* resurrection from the dead He would be the first to proclaim light both to the *Jewish* people and to the Gentiles.”

Paul stood before King Agrippa and proclaimed the truth of Jesus Christ. Again, pointing to not only the mandate to reveal Christ to all. Paul did not try to leverage others influence. Rather, Paul saw Agrippa and all that heard him as humans who needed salvation through Christ. After hearing Paul, the king stated that he was close to being convinced to become a Christ follower. Presenting Jesus Christ to anyone that will listen has been proven to be a powerful missional tool no matter how influential they are.

Wiersbe states that Paul’s life and ministry is “witnessing (see Acts 26:16). He simply shared with others what he had learned and experienced as a follower of Jesus Christ. His message was not something he manufactured, for it was based solidly on the Old Testament Scriptures. We must remind ourselves that Paul and the other apostles did not have the New Testament but used the Old Testament to lead sinners to Christ and to nurture the new believers”.²³

1 Corinthians 1:22-23

“Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness.”

Regardless of what the populace is searching for, Paul wrote that “we preach Christ” (1 Cor. 1:22). We are wise to adhere to Paul’s statement. The world may be looking for an impressive church that does and says what is desired, but that is not what drives the church of Jesus Christ. The East prides itself on the ideology of signs or proofs and the west bases its positions on wisdom. These are not necessarily evil, but they miss the eternal significance of the second person of the Trinity coming to redeem a fallen world. Paul challenged both with the simple message of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Leon Morris concludes that the Greek practice of “speculative philosophy” that sought wisdom “often degenerated into meaningless sophistries (*cf* Acts 17:21). In contrast with this (but, *de*, is adversative, and *we*, *hemis*, is emphatic), Paul sets the preaching of Christ crucified. The verb *preach* (*kerysso*) is that appropriate to the action of a herald.”²⁴

2 Corinthians 4:4-5

“The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord and ourselves as your bond servants for Jesus’ sake.”

The greatest temptation the church faces is to promote self over Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul reminded the Corinthian church that Satan deviously blinds people. This is not a physical blindness, but a

²² Wiersbe, 480.

²³ Wiersbe, 480.

²⁴ Leon Morris, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries Revised Edition* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), 45-46.

perceptive blindness. This is especially horrible when it is the glory of Jesus Christ, the image of God that cannot be seen.

Responding to this passage, D. E. Garland raises the propensity to lose sight of the focus of preaching even in the 1st century.

The temptation to preach ourselves is fed by congregations who are “prone to like to be entertained and to enjoy a minister’s self-exhibition” and are prone “to indulge in a personality cult.” Clearly, Corinth was such a congregation, rallying around and exaggerating the importance of their ministerial heroes (1 Cor 1:12) and using their worship to show off their own individual gifts (1 Cor 14:26). They may have encouraged Paul’s rivals in their boasting and berated him for his failure to display more dramatically his apostolic prowess.²⁵

The Greek word *doxa* is translated glory. When walking outside on a sunny day, the glory (*doxa*) of the sun is so great that we cannot look at the sun. Jesus Christ is the brilliance of God so to preach and focus on anything else is a mistake.

Garland goes further when he states, “Christless preaching quickly degenerates into vapid moralism. Paul has already argued that no transformation can occur except through Christ (3:18).”²⁶ The argument of this paper is that preaching anything other than Jesus Christ misses the opportunity for transformation. Garland does not commit a hyperbole if one only sees the unmistakable glory of God in Jesus Christ.

Colossians 1:25-28

“I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God, that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. We proclaim Him.”

In this letter, Paul gives a thorough description of Jesus Christ (vv. 15-20) then he announces that “We proclaim Him” (1:28). The New American Standard Bible records Paul using the word Christ twenty-nine times in ninety-five verses. Obviously, the focus of both the letter and of Paul is Jesus Christ. Paul does not demand that Christ be preached or proclaimed but he does emphasize what they did in the first century. Undoubtedly, the theme of Colossians is Christ Jesus. To focus on any other topic would be a dreadful error.

N. T. Wright, in his study of Colossians sets a directive when he states, “Him we proclaim: these words serve, for Christian preachers and teachers, as a constant reminder of their central calling, not (first and foremost) to comment on current affairs or to alleviate human problems, good and necessary as those activities may be, but to announce that Jesus is Lord.”²⁷

The church of Colossi grappled with Gnosticism which would tarnish the second person of the Trinity, so Paul wrote in no uncertain terms that proclaiming Christ Jesus was for the expressed purpose of presenting “every man complete in Christ” (1:28). The importance of this cannot be minimized. Neither can proclaiming anything else be maximized.

Current Church Trends

The church planting movement is evidence that Christian leaders see the need to be obedient to the great commission. One such movement is Acts 29 that is self-described as “a diverse, global community of healthy, multiplying churches characterized by theological clarity, cultural engagement, and missional

²⁵ D. E. Garland, *2 Corinthians Vol. 29* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 214.

²⁶ Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 215.

²⁷ N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), 93.

innovation.”²⁸ Foundational assumptions are well-articulated but curiously do not include any mention of the person of Jesus Christ. Christians and the Church are referenced but it lacks focus as was found in the above scriptural references. This is not a criticism of this movement’s beliefs. Neither can we assume any sinister motive, rather it simply points out that Christ is not a passion at the forefront of their initial presentation.

Don Fanning asks, “How was it that the Early Church spread so rapidly throughout the hostile Roman Empire in the first century of its existence?”²⁹ His answer is that, “It was not just evangelism of winning individuals to Christ but rather the bonding of every individual believer into local groups that committed themselves to follow Jesus’ commands and share their newfound freedom of forgiveness and acceptance through Jesus Christ.”³⁰ Fanning goes on to present the Church Planting Movement (CPM) as not only an effective movement but also a vital movement designed to obediently fulfill the great commission as the first century church did.

Fanny does provide the “how to” which includes the following common characteristics of the CPM. “1. Worship in the heart language; 2. Evangelism has communal implications; 3. Rapid incorporation of new converts into the life and ministry of the church; 4. Passion and fearlessness due to a sense of urgency of the importance of salvation and conversion.; 5. A price to pay to become a Christian; 6. Perceived leadership crisis or spiritual vacuum in society; 7. On-the-job training for church leadership; 8. Leadership authority is decentralized for ease of decision-making in a dynamic movement; 9. Outsiders keep a low profile; 10. Missionaries suffer persecution.”³¹ Additional distinctives observed are “Prayer, Scripture, Family, Disciple Making and Teaching Obedience.”³² There can be no arguments with a community experiencing these but there seems to be something missing; Jesus Christ.

In an attempt to reconcile evangelical intent and social concern in one particular denomination, Jason Davies-Kildea states,

The Salvation Army is one of the best-known community organizations in Australia and is highly respected for its service to those in need – at the frontlines of natural disasters, housing the homeless and lending a helping hand to struggling families. What is less well known to those outside the movement is that The Salvation Army is a Christian church. Once the driving force of an evangelical movement dedicated to social change, the organization’s religious roots are increasingly becoming a fact of history and less a noticeable presence within the community.”³³

The founder of the Salvation Army, William Booth (1829-1912), stated

We believe in the old-fashioned salvation. We have not developed and improved into Universalism, Unitarianism, or Nothingarianism, or any other form of infidelity, and we don't expect to. Ours is just the same salvation taught in the Bible, proclaimed by Prophets and Apostles, preached by Luther and Wesley and Whitefield, sealed by the blood of martyrs--the very same salvation which was purchased by the sufferings and agony and Blood of the Son of God. We believe the world needs it; this and this alone will set the world right. We want no other nostrum-- nothing new. We are on the track of the old Apostles. You don't need to mix up any other ingredients with the heavenly remedy.³⁴

²⁸ “Acts 29,” Accessed April 3, 2022. <https://www.acts29.com/about-us/>

²⁹ Don Fanning, “Church Planting Movements” (2009). *Trends and Issues in Missions*. 6. https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgm_missions/6,1.

³⁰ Fanning, 1.

³¹ Fanning, 8-9.

³² Fanning, 9.

³³ J. M. H. Davies-Kildea, “The Salvation Army and the Social Gospel: Reconciling Evangelical Intent and Social Concern,” PhD Thesis, Monash University (2017), 3.

³⁴ Harold Begbie, *The Life of General William Booth* (New York: Macmillan, 1920), 406.

It should be noted that the Salvation Army is not the only denomination that has emphasized “doing” more than “knowing” but they are a prime example of a denomination that has lost a part of their initial focus on Jesus Christ.

Glen Packiam, writing for the Barna Group, regarding the central message of denominations, states, We discovered that the split in priorities falls along broad denominational lines. When asked to rank a list of missional priorities, U.S. pastors list church priorities in this order: Sharing the gospel with non-Christians locally (72%), local poverty (58%) and caring for the elderly and widows (53%). But a closer analysis reveals a deeper divide. Over four in five mainline church pastors (86%) rank local poverty most highly as their church’s missional priority compared to half of non-mainline church pastors (48%). Meanwhile, sharing the gospel with non-Christians locally was the top priority for 83 percent of non-mainline pastors compared to 37 percent of mainline pastors. Given this data, what possible path forward exists for the Church? Our starting point has to be Jesus. The mission of Jesus is how the mission of God took on flesh. And the mission of God is to put his world back together, to return shalom to the cosmos—a world made whole, a world that is flourishing and filled with the glory of God.³⁵

It is common to read sermon titles on social media prior to any given Sunday. In most cases, they have followed the pattern set by Rick Warren to preach sermons that while are helpful to deal with the challenges of life, are not preaching Jesus Christ as was the habit of the 1st century churches. Assessing Warren’s preferred manner of preaching, Kenton C. Anderson states that it is pragmatic preaching which is a “need-solution focus.”³⁶ “The pragmatic sermon is all about life application.”³⁷ This seems to be a healthy focus for sermons after all, the desire for changed lives is the bottom line except the bottom line may put the cart before the horse. Should Jesus be preached or is it unnecessary if the bottom line is changed lives? The danger is to forget Jesus Christ.

The acclaimed preacher, Haddon Robinson said that “more heresy gets preached in application than in any other aspect of the sermon”³⁸ which should give us pause to reflect on the need for focus on the person of Jesus Christ rather than on the perceived needs of this common preaching practice.

Modern preaching may gravitate to a “needs-solution focus” but without the context that the 1st century church had, which was to preach the “who,” sermons run the risk of losing representing and experiencing the presence of God. John Piper, in his book “The Supremacy of God in Preaching, reminds preachers that their task is to represent God and his glory by means of the sermon.”³⁹

Scott Gibson, speaking of the post-modern church declares that sermons have become antidotes to bruised egos, lists of how-toes, and topical discussions on any number of themes-but not biblically centered expositions of what the Bible said to the people and culture to which it was written and what it says to men and women today. Sermons move away from the text and launch into topical lists of how to be a better Christian or how to raise a decent family or how to develop good relationship. Certainly, one would not argue against any of these topics as virtuous for the Christian. However, when pastors or any other teachers do this, they face the problem of using the Bible as a prop.”⁴⁰

British scholar, John Stott, wrote: “if the word revelation emphasizes God’s initiative in making himself known and inspiration denotes the process he employed, then authority indicates the result.

³⁵ Glenn Packiam, “What Is the Mission of the Church?,” *Barna Group Guest Column*, <https://www.barna.com/church-mission/>

³⁶ Kenton C. Anderson, *Choosing to Preach: A Comprehensive Introduction to Sermon Options and Structures* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 161.

³⁷ Anderson, *Choosing to Preach*, 167.

³⁸ Anderson, 168.

³⁹ Anderson, 102.

⁴⁰ Scott Gibson, et. al., *Preaching to A Shifting Culture Twelve Perspectives On Communicating that Connects* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 220.

Because Scripture is the revelation of God by the inspiration of the Spirit, it has authority over us.”⁴¹ To be diverted to any other topic for preaching not only deviates from the 1st century church practice, but it also minimizes the effectiveness of preaching. Carefully, attending to preaching and teaching who God is in the person of Jesus Christ is being true to God’s revelatory mission. The 1st century church did not seem to be concerned with the results of preaching Christ. These New Testament believers zealously shared what was burning within their hearts. The clarion call for those who preach in the 21st century is to encounter the living Christ and be so inclined to present him to this godless world.

Conclusion

Michael Eaton observes, “Most of the time in our preaching we talk about people’s problems and issues. We need to preach about God, as Paul did: the God of the Bible, the Holy God, the Righteous God, the Pure God, the Sin-hating God. We don’t need to argue for God; we need to declare Him.”⁴²

If we are to take the words of the apostle Paul as crucial to the argument that the focus of the early church was Jesus Christ, this passage must be considered. “How can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them” (Romans 10:14)? Peter adds, “There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among mankind by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

Donavon W. Shoemaker rightly summarizes the mission given to the church by its Lord. “Jesus’ plan is that people will recognize Him through their interfacing with His Church. In other words, we show ourselves to be His disciples because we are His disciples. Our doing comes from our being.”⁴³ Shoemaker could go further by stating that when the church speaks of Jesus, it is truly showing that they are his people. To preach, teach, and speak of anything but Jesus Christ, who is the only hope for the world, is most definitely missing the mark. It is deviating from the focus of the early church and is not compassionate towards those in overwhelming eternal need. Additionally, if our energies are given to surface efforts to the exclusion of drawing attention to who God is, our time is largely wasted.

While our present day affords many blessings that were not present in the first century including a measure of freedom to preach Jesus Christ unabated -in the western context- as well as the numerous physical assets such as technological advancements, we lose meaning if the centrality of our message is not Jesus Christ.

The early church including the apostles gladly suffered much. They had an overwhelming love for their Master, so they focused on him. Should we do less, it may indicate that the present church desperately needs a first century encounter with Jesus Christ.

⁴¹ Gibson, 223.

⁴² Michael Eaton, et. al., *Preach the Word: The Call and Challenge of Preaching Today* (Lancaster: Sovereign World Limited, 2006), 109.

⁴³ Donavon W. Shoemaker, *Building Bridges in The Church Jesus Builds: A Dialogue on the Church in the 21st Century*, ed. Joseph Coleson (Indianapolis: Wesleyan, 2007), 180.

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