

# THROUGH ALL GENERATIONS

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## Jesus People Invest Deeply in the Gospel Mission

Jesus People (Part 8)

Text: Acts 18:1-23

### I

It's hard not to be humbled by how deeply the first followers of Jesus invested in the Gospel mission and Acts 18 gives us some sense of this. The text opens up by saying **"After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth."** Later on in verse 18, we're told **"Then he left the brothers and sailed for Syria."** We see him down in **"Caesarea,"** then up in **"Antioch,"** then (verse 23 says) **"Paul set out from there and traveled from place to place through the region of Galatia and Phrygia."** We see Paul in several parts of Greece, traveling the entire length of the country of Turkey, and journeying through the lands of Israel and Syria. And that's just one chapter. A few years back, some of us from Christ Church retraced a tiny part of Paul's travels. We found that to walk even half-a-mile over the kind of terrain and in the sort of climate Paul did daily winded a lot of us. Scholars estimate however that, all in all, the Apostle Paul traveled 13,000 miles for the sake of the gospel cause. We're not talking Business Class.

With this travel often came tremendous hardship. Chapter 18:6 says that some in Corinth **"opposed Paul and became abusive."** Later in verse 12 we hear how some others **"made a united attack on Paul and brought him into court."** Lest we think that this was an unusual experience for him, in 2 Corinthians 11:24 Paul gives us a summary of his experiences. **"Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from [all sides]... I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst... been cold and naked."**

Why does the Apostle Paul travel such lengths and sacrifice so much? Why is he willing to make a commitment like this? He answers the question in 2 Corinthians 11:28. **"I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches."** Or as Acts 18:23 implies, I am moved by my burden to keep **"strengthening all the disciples."** The question I want to ask you today is: As we look around our culture and communities today and see what's going on, can we feel the pressure of concern for our church? Can we muster a surge of commitment to do what it takes to keep our church vital, so that it keeps strengthening all the disciples that get shaped and go forth from here? I could try to whip us up by quoting stats about the decrease of church attendance nationally and the increase of moral confusion, even among Christians. I could point us to the newspaper articles about the witches club meeting at a nearby high school or the

divisions in society for which an alternative vision of life is so sorely needed. But I'm not going to do that. I'm just going to tell you about one day in the life of Christ Church.

## II

On Thursday October 12, 2006 I stood in a church building in Pearlington, Mississippi. When Hurricane Katrina hit the year before, the wind took off the roof of the church. The water level rose to about 8 feet. Just about everything was washed away, leaving behind a layer of sludge 3 feet deep in what was left of the place. Most houses in the area were reduced to scattered kindling. Everything was lost, except the bond of Christian love that made some people in other parts of the country think not: "Oh, well, another disaster," but "What can we do for these neighbors?"

A retired business executive in this congregation organized a network of local churches into an virtual agency called LovingNeighbors. Another member of this church dedicated trucks from his company to move donated supplies. The people of Christ Church responded en masse. We shipped over \$100,000 worth of materials South. Some of you went to Mississippi yourself to help with the relief and recovery effort. On that October day, the church I stood in was now re-roofed, clean, and with pews that are again being filled on Sundays with people. I met individuals living in trailers adorned with the contents of the the Home Starter Kits you sent. I met an elderly widow soon to be in a real home of her own again, because of disciples whose strength shows in their generosity.

I got home about 7 p.m. and was called out at 8:15 p.m. to a home in the town where I live. There were four children there, ranging from a high school senior to a second grader. The mother in the home was raised Jewish. The father was Catholic. They were not active in any congregation, but they needed one because Dad was dying of colon cancer. I gathered the kids around the bedside. They told their dad again how much they loved him. We read Scripture together, anointed his head with oil, and prayed. He died at 9:05. I asked the mother: Who have you got to help you. She mentioned a woman from the community who had been helping with childcare. She told of another who'd been organizing meals. She cited a third who was assisting with other practical needs. I just smiled. All three of those angels were members of Christ Church. A new hospice worker arrived at the home shortly after dad died. "Oh, hi, Rev. Meyer," she said. "I'm... I go to Christ Church."

## III

As I drove home late that night, I thought to myself: "How many places is this happening?" Answer: "Lots of them." There are villages around the world where life is slowly getting better because someone we are investing in or some project we've funded is making a difference. There are untold numbers of community organizations,

schools and agencies, of one kind or another where the people of Christ Church are influencing the world for the better. There are listening ears and helping hands being extended to others in pain. There are values being woven into business decisions and virtues being displayed under pressure. There are kids in college making choices differently, and people in retirement thinking more creatively about how to use their gifts now, and souls and relationships being redeemed, because there has existed here on the corner of Thirty-First and York a church that has committed itself deeply to the Gospel mission and to strengthening the disciples.

Do you suppose the influence of this Church would be what it is today if we'd invested chosen not to invest in the physical fabric of the church too? If the congregation that built the Sanctuary back in 1969 had said, "Listen, there are only 200 of us here. We don't need to spend this kind of money on a Sanctuary. Let's just build a little chapel instead and use our money for other things." Would Christ Church have become what it did? Would \$1,500,000 have gone out in mission from this church as it did last year? Would this congregation have the witnesses it does in so many places it does today, if people said along the way, "You know, we've gotten by so far without that Children's Wing, that Student Center, or that Fellowship Hall. Let's not invest there. We can certainly get by without that. Technology – that's just bells and whistles. We'll be fine with these IBM Selectrics. They're built to last."

I know I am being a little edgy here, but it is for a purpose. There is not a serious and thriving enterprise in any sphere of life that does not invest regularly in freshening the functionality and aesthetics of their physical plant. I'll grant you that there are some cathedrals in Europe and a lot of little churches in America that haven't had a capital campaign in quite a few years, but then they no longer have many members to whom to make the appeal. I can appreciate why some people ask at capital campaign times: "Shouldn't we be putting this money into Mission?" To be brutally blunt: Some people ask that simply as a dodge. They're not planning to invest very deeply anywhere. But here's the truth I want to impress upon all of us who I know are very sincere about our mission as Jesus People.

Christ Church is not a perfect church, but if you have visited around much, then you know that it is a special place. Fewer than 2% of the churches in America are able to give rise to the kind of membership, ministry, and mission impact that this congregation, by God's grace alone, has. Those other churches who have, make a habit of keeping their home base – and especially the environment that supports the congregation's worship life and their nurture of children – as current and attractive as they can. They want to connect with as many people and strengthen as many disciples as they possibly can. They know that how they support worship and kids is absolutely essential to that. But their eyes are always on the same target the Apostle Paul had. The better they are at helping people worship God, grow in Christ, and serve in the power of the Spirit, the greater their capacity to exert a Kingdom influence that honors God and blesses the world.

## IV

As you consider your commitment to that enterprise today, let me leave you with three brief encouragements. First, you don't have to travel 13,000 miles to have a profound influence on the Gospel mission. You can make a pledge from your pew today; and I know you'll make contributions in lots of other ways as you head out into the world. Secondly, we are not asking you to endure the lashings that Paul did, although you may find some spiritual value if you touch sacrifice in some way with your gift. If, for some reason, you choose not to pledge, there will be no beatings with rods. Finally, rejoice in this with me: That ravaged church in Pearlinton is worshipping again this morning too. That family who lost their dad to cancer, has started coming here to our worship services and our kids programs. This is the mission we are all about. May that kind of witness to life-changing love continue. And may God's faithfulness be known through all generations.

*Please pray with me... And now lead us on, O Jesus, great Lord of the Church. Use us for your glory and the blessing of this world. In thy wonderful name we pray. Amen.*