

Preaching Jesus Boldly

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[0 : 00] This is the AM service on August 2, 1998. The preacher is Bill Graham.

His sermon is entitled Preaching Jesus Boldly and is from Acts 9, verses 20-30.

I pray that you would sow the seed of eternal life in our hearts this morning as we open your word, that whatever from your holy word we can learn, we may indeed fulfil the same through Christ our Lord.

Well, it is a great pleasure for me to be invited to share today with you and I want to say thank you to you as a church for the continued support you have given to the work of the Church Missionary Society and the general cause of missions throughout the world.

I gather last night you all prepared to make fools of yourself, for Christ's sake. And that's very encouraging to know that those kind of Christians in the world today. Yes. Particularly thank you too for your support, for your linked missionaries with CMS, for Claire Beck working in Pakistan and for the Glover slash Graze contingent.

[1 : 31] We really do appreciate the support you give to the work they're doing which is very valuable work indeed. Now, this morning we've had the reading from Acts which is the series you're involved in studying and services and I want to particularly begin by looking at the last verses of that passage where Luke is describing to us the work of the Church at that point of time, the state of the Church.

So in Acts 9, 31 we have the words, Then the Church throughout all Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace.

It was strengthened and encouraged by the Holy Spirit. It grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord. It's a wonderful picture.

Every now and again on the way through Acts the author pauses to give us just these little rubrics almost about the state of things in the life of the early Church.

And this is one of those and most encouraging indeed and impressive. I wonder if we were to just make a slight alteration to it, would it work? If we were to read something like Then the Church throughout Australia or throughout Melbourne Diocese or maybe even at Doncaster enjoyed a time of peace.

[3 : 03] It was strengthened and encouraged by the Holy Spirit. It grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord. I wonder how that would work. As a person who has a chance to move around quite a lot throughout Melbourne and Victoria and indeed parts of Australia and even overseas, you gain various impressions of the life of the Church.

And I have to sadly confess that it often doesn't measure up to this picture. And that's a sad thing to have to confess. But it should be the earnest prayer and desire of each one of us that the Church, at least of which we are part, measures up in some way to this kind of a picture.

I think there were five characteristics I noted here just mentioned in this verse. And I just want to focus on them for a moment. That we might say, look, here is the picture.

This is what we would like our Church to be like. We're told here that the Church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. And I take it that that's really referring to the external circumstances in which the Church at that time existed.

For a time in their early days, they had suffered a time of opposition and indeed of abuse from the communities around about them. But it would seem just at this point that had died down.

[4 : 28] Maybe it had something to do with Paul being taken out of the equation or Saul of Tarsus as he had been. And they now enjoyed a time of peace and security in terms of their external freedoms.

Now when you think about that, really that's the condition the Church in Australia has been through for many years. We have never really, in terms of the way churches throughout the world do suffer, had to go through a time where we have not had external peace.

We groan and we complain about some of the things that are happening in our society which we feel limited us. But in comparison with many churches, that's not the case. And if we think about the places where many of our missionaries are working, if we think about Pakistan and Nepal, for example, the picture is very, very different.

Think about the situation which the Nepali Church goes through where they are not officially allowed to proselytise and where there has been persecution. And certainly in recent times, in Pakistan that has been true, where the Church is very severely restricted in many ways and where in recent times Christians have been arrested on trumped up charges and charged with a blasphemy against the faith, the large faith of that country, the Islamic faith, and where there have been executions.

And that situation is far from being like this where they enjoyed a time of peace. Now we here enjoy the time of peace.

[6 : 01] And really what ought to be happening was what we're saying with these liberties we ought to be taking every opportunity we can get and valuing that liberty and freedom that we have. The second ingredient here, the second characteristic I think, is that they were strengthened.

We're told that quite plainly. They enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened. Now in that, that must have to do to some degree with what the Christians were actually doing also.

You can't do much to organise freedom and peace around you. But you can contribute towards the strengthening of the Church. It's not just to do with what we do and what our leaders do, but it is a great deal to do with it nevertheless.

And no doubt here it applies to the fact that they are being built up as they were taught the Word of God and as they submitted themselves to that teaching and tried to make sure it worked out in their own living and obedience and way of life.

They were strengthened by the pastoral care that went on within the congregation. They were built up and strengthened by the good administration that was going on.

[7 : 13] And so these are all things that we can contribute to within the life of the Church and share in and must take responsibility for. There's a lot we can contribute to the strengthening of the Church.

This is to do with its inner life, which we do have some control over. They were also encouraged, we're told here, they were encouraged by the Holy Spirit.

And that picks up on the whole idea of what the ministry of the Spirit was really to be in accordance with what Jesus had predicted way back in the Gospel stories. It's to do with the work of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the One who comes, the Counselor, the One who stands beside and adds that supernatural strengthening and support to the life of the Christian community.

And that's what we see happening here. Now there again, that's not something we control. That is something that is the sovereign work of the Spirit of God. And yet there is a sense in which we are cooperative in that ministry because it's quite clear from Scripture that we can cooperate with the work of God's Spirit and therefore the blessing flows.

Or we can resist it, we can prevent it in a sense from a human perspective of trying to be active. We can be found to be resisting or quenching the Spirit.

[8 : 39] And that's something we're warned about and we have to be careful of. It's not something we organise. We don't organise the work of the Spirit. We don't get the Spirit to work by exciting Him or something like that.

But we do cooperate. with the work of the Spirit. Then we're told that they were growing in numbers. Now that is an important one, I think.

Sometimes people will tell us that numbers don't matter and that small churches are perfectly acceptable. And I understand that there's a certain truth in that sort of thing.

But I'm impressed by how many times in the Acts of the Apostles we're told how many people were converted and that the Church was growing in numbers. Because surely if there are millions of people out there untold and who do not know the love and the grace of Christ we must desperately want many of them to come to know.

We are concerned about numbers from that point of view. Now numbers don't necessarily reflect success. But if we're not concerned about people in great numbers coming to know Christ then we

miss out on that whole dimension that the New Testament is concerned for it seems to me.

[9 : 55] So they were growing in numbers and in the fear of the Lord living in the fear of the Lord. Here there was such a deep reverence for God a deep concern for reflecting godliness in the life of the individual and of the congregation and that is a factor which ought to be certainly true of our life as Christians and as a congregation.

the fear of the Lord ought to be seen in the life of the people of God. Now here are these five characteristics of this early church and I want to urge you to make it your prayer that those characteristics will be true of your congregation here and of the church throughout Australia and that it will be true of the churches where our missionaries the people you work with and in partnership with throughout the world.

To me it's significant that this little description comes at the end of the story of Saul's conversion and of the first three years of his ministry.

I think it's significant because it would seem to me that Paul was probably one of the great contributors to the life of the church being like that certainly in the years that followed this. And so I want to suggest to you if we just examine a little of this story that we've read this morning of these first three years of Paul's ministry perhaps there we will be able to draw out some of the ingredients that are fundamentally important if we're going to see a church grow like this particular church grew.

[11 : 40] So let us have a look therefore at just some of the ingredients that you find in Paul's ministry here which will help us. If we look at the story just the outline of the story first.

I think last week you looked at the story of Saul's conversion there on the Damascus road. He, the great persecutor of the church at the time travelling to Damascus with the aim of taking prisoner Christians there and bringing them back for trial.

The great persecutor of the church becomes the believer becomes a disciple. Suddenly his whole life is turned inside out and he becomes a believer a commissioned missionary for the one he opposed.

And that having happened he arrives in Damascus a believer which is very confusing no doubt for all the Christians there. And we're told the first thing he did when he got there was begin to try and align himself with the Christian community.

Now they of course were very suspicious about him understandably and therefore they were not too willing to welcome him into their midst. But fortunately it was one person there who was concerned that Paul be grafted into the life of the church and that was Ananias.

[13 : 07] Ananias takes Paul and introduces him to the Christians and helps him to become part of the fellowship of believers. And in that alone we have a wonderful principle don't we?

The principle of how much we need Ananias people who see how important it is to introduce people into the life of the community of God's people.

And I hope here in your church you have many Ananias and Barnabases people who watch out for the visitor who watch out for the newcomer who watch out for the person from a different background from a different ethnic group or whatever it might be and make sure that they are introduced and drawn in.

Oh they're all people in God's church for Ananias. What a difference it would make in many congregations. Well he becomes part of the fellowship there.

And then we're told that he immediately begins to preach at once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God further down it says he began to he grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.

[14 : 23] So here this one who had opposed Jesus had at the very heart of things seen Jesus as blasphemy now begins powerfully to preach that Jesus is the Son of God the Christ.

And so now this great mind this man who had been so deeply trained in all the tradition and the theology of Judaism now finds that whole theology turned inside out as Jesus becomes the centre of it and the whole significance of all that he'd believed all that he had studied all that he had understood and all that he himself perhaps had taught before that time now has a totally new significance for it.

There comes a new central point for it. The point is this Jesus and he begins to now proclaim that this Jesus is nothing other than the fulfilment the realisation that all of that tradition of his Judaism had stood for and longed for.

The hopes the meaning of ancient Israel had found their fulfilment in this person. This person was none other than the goal that that whole history of Israel had headed for.

he was indeed the true son of God the true messianic royal Davidic king who had come to rescue God's people and that becomes the centre of his message and as a result of that becoming the centre of his message he meets furious opposition from Jews who had held the same position he had held until recently.

[16:10] they are powerless to refute his argumentation and so they go down the same track that seems to have always been the traditional approach. They decide they've got to get rid of him just as they decided to murder Jesus just as they had decided and he'd been involved in the decision to murder Stephen so now they decide to do that to Saul of Tarsus and he has to leave Damascus the one who had come to persecute is persecuted the one who had left Jerusalem as the great persecutor of the church returns as a persecuted member of the church and it's at that point of course that once again we see him being welcomed into the church in Jerusalem not without difficulty Barnabas is the one now who has to take him and introduce him to the timid disciples who are worried about whether he really is what he appears to be and yet he is accepted into the church and there again he continues on told he preaches

Christ boldly he talks and debates with them and he particularly debates with the Grecian Jews the Hellenistic Jews those who perhaps had belonged to that particular synagogue in Jerusalem maybe the one to which Paul himself had belonged perhaps the one to which Stephen had belonged and which Stephen had preached and that particular one would have been very significant if that were the case because Paul himself had been involved perhaps in that synagogue and in its pursuit persecution of Stephen and then the pursuit of Christians people and now Paul is there within that synagogue preaching that Jesus is indeed the Christ what a tremendous turnaround there of course opposition arises again and he is forced to flee from Jerusalem and returns to Cilicia to his own hometown of

Tarsus and so we come to that end of that three year period of this very important ministry the beginnings of this very important career Saul become Paul the apostle so as we look at that particular experience of Saul's I think I find there four particular ingredients in the ministry of Paul which it seems to me are fundamental contributors they're fundamental ingredients if we're going to see a church like the one described here a church that in a time of freedom in this particular situation was strengthened encouraged by the Holy Spirit grew in numbers living in the fear of the Lord four ingredients that contribute towards that habit and they are first of all he was Christ centred secondly he was spirit empowered thirdly he was a courageous witness and fourthly he was prepared to pay the cost and they are four things I think we need to pray will be realities in our life as a church and that each one of us will seek to see as a reality in some way in our own lives first of all being Christ centred and this is the fundamental one this is the basis out of which the others flow it seems to me you see this was the heart of

Paul's whole life and ministry as we read on into the epistles and as we read this morning in that reading from 2 Timothy certainly Paul's great ministry his great desire was to preach Christ we preach Christ crucified he said he was determined to know nothing else among the Corinthians except Christ crucified when he spoke of his own personal life's commitment to the Philippians he said for me to live is Christ that was the all consuming passion of Paul's life and what everything else had to relate to personally Christ had taken him prisoner taken him prisoner when he was in total opposition to Christ and all that Christ stood for Christ had defeated him taken him prisoner and Christ had then shed his love into Paul's heart in a way that Paul could never previously have understood and from a theological perspective from the perspective of his own intellectual understanding of things

Christ had taken control he was the key Paul was already well informed in the scriptures he understood his Old Testament he thought thoroughly but now there came a new key to unlocking all of the mystery of that history of Israel and Israel's beliefs and practices as they had come to be expressed in Judaism he had a well developed world view of things that world view had to be changed very radically once Christ took over now his world view was no longer inward looking into the life of Israel it was outward looking to the world around and to the need of the world and the significance of what God had done in Israel and what God was going to do through his new community for the whole world his perspective was now global the ends of the earth and at the centre of that perspective was Christ that's what governed it all previously for Paul

[22:12] Judaism was what he had really been concerned about and all that that meant religion was really what he was preaching now he no longer preached religion he preached Christ that was his message it was a person not a system but he was concerned about and there's where we must stand as Christians that's what we must be concerned about and we must be concerned that our congregation that our church surely as Anglicans that our denomination that this is what we're on about we're not on about religion we're on about Christ as I think about our own denomination at the moment I often wonder whether we could describe our denomination as on about Christ at the present moment our leaders from all over the world are gathering in England at the great Lambeth conference we need to pray that out of that there will come great things ten years ago they met and a great vision was shared that this decade in which we are now living coming towards its end would be the decade of evangelism wonderful vision and no doubt in some parts of the world that has been achieved but when we look at the Australian church is that really what this decade has been about

I have to say when I look at it it seems to me that the two things that this decade will be remembered for are the production of a new prayer book and a discussion about women's ordination now don't hear me wrongly I'm not saying we don't need good prayer books and good worship and certainly these issues like women's ordination should have been addressed but I don't think this decade will be remembered as the decade of evangelism and church growth in Australia now we need to pray that that will be the case we need to pray that Christ will be the central theme of our church life which dominates it all both at the local level and nationally and the second thing that is mentioned here about Paul the second great ingredient it seems to me is that Paul comes through as clearly the spirit empowered man he was not just a powerful preacher he was not just an able debater he was not just a man of great intellect although he no doubt was all of those things but when

Paul preached something happened the spirit of God worked through him and the spirit of God worked in the hearts and the minds of those who listened to him and things happened people were converted people were stirred up people were given a vision and that's not surprising this is what Jesus said would happen when he commissioned his disciples they were to be his witnesses in Jerusalem Judea Samaria and to the outermost parts of the world and to do that they would be empowered by the Holy Spirit this was clearly his Jesus strategy when he had formed his little community of believers around him he made them his disciples he instructed them they came to recognize who he was they came to believe in him they put their hopes in him they came to understand him as the center of their lives but then he would empower them with his spirit not just so they would be clever or win arguments but so through the very work of the sovereign spirit in the lives of the people they went to great things would happen change would happen now this is an ingredient in the life of the church which we can't engineer we can't cause the spirit to work because we sing louder or longer or because we do certain things that seem to be mechanistically able to stir people up that won't work that's not the work of the spirit but it is true that the spirit will work when we faithfully proclaim Christ and in humble prayerful dependence upon the work of the spirit of God look to him for the results we must have the right focus the right humble attitude of spirit and we must be people who are not there to prevent God working not quenching the spirit not resisting his work amongst but open to the power of him working amongst then when that happens in a sense God's great secret weapon is set free and it's interesting to look at the story of mission in the world because that has happened we think about the place the glove is working now in a power a place where it is illegal to preach the gospel and where missionaries had to go in very sensitively and work alongside way back 50 years ago just a handful of Nepali Christians and now over that period of what since 1950s through to the 1990s something like 300,000 or more Christians will be worshipping today in Nepal because you see no matter what officialdom says you cannot contain the work of God's spirit and when God's people are there faithfully witnessing God's spirit will be work we need that ingredient in our church life and that then leads on I think to the third ingredient when Christ is faithfully proclaimed and the spirit works then there will be courage among the Christians and that was true of Paul here was true of the early church Paul was certainly courageous you see we read that after many days had gone by the Jews conspired to kill him and we're constantly reading that sort of experience in Paul's life as we go on through the acts of the apostles as we read his epistles his career was constantly an expression of amazing courage now by nature I'm quite sure Paul was a pretty tough outspoken kind of a person but that's not the

courage that is being referred to here this is courage which comes from the work of god strengthening this man and that's what we need we need to be courageous christians now it may well be as i speak to you this morning you say to me well i don't feel a very courageous christian i look back over the past week and i know that during that week there were many opportunities i had to speak for christ and i really didn't take the opportunity and i often feel rather fragile in doing that well if you feel like that this morning come and join the club we'll meet together it's so often true of us and if we ask why is it that we often aren't courageous christians giving courageous witness i think there are a whole range of reasons i think often one reason is we really do have a lack of security in our own knowledge and understanding of the faith but when we have really opened ourselves up and given ourselves over to the time as we do in so many other areas of our life our professional life we don't have too much trouble most of us is talking about our profession and there are other areas of life which we've given ourselves over to understand and grasp and master and therefore we're confident to go out and speak about that but you see so many of our people sitting in church this morning their real grasp of the faith will be rather fragile and their real confidence in being able to speak and defend their faith will not be strong however can we give courageous witness if we only have a smattering and a superficial understanding of our faith and there are a number of ingredients like that which will enable us to be courageous witnesses and we need to work on that what will help me to be a courageous witness if i have utter conviction about christ and then truly converted to him and know who he is for me both in mind and in heart and if then i have come to understand the work of god's spirit that he will be there for me in those times when i witness then we will begin to develop a courageous witness that's certainly true of many of our missionaries for many of those people in nepal and pakistan courage is needed and then the fourth ingredient that we notice here in the life of this man paul was that he had counted the cost clearly paul's conversion cost him a lot i don't know if you've ever thought about that you see we tend to take for granted that here was this great man with his background and his strength of mind and character and the deep experience he had had of the work of christ and so on and we don't stop to think that when he decided to become a christian it must have cost him a great deal i mean he had a great career as a pharisee he tells us that and that was gone but when we think just from a personal point of view when we think about how much he suffered indeed in his conversion story jesus tells um ananias that he must go and show him how much he must suffer for my name now that that's not a sort of an encouragement to conversion is it you know i mean usually when we have evangelistic crusades we don't first of all tell people when they've come into church if it's a church meeting now look you folks before you think about becoming a christian here you're going to have to suffer terribly if you become a christian that's not usually the way we begin it but that seems to be what he's been told here before he decides it will cost him personally and the other side of this of course is that what did it really cost paul in other ways personally to become the person he was about his family what did happen to saint paul's family relationships after he became the great apostle to the gentiles what did happen to all those friends he'd had you know in sort of gamaliel's university classes that he'd been friends with in a time when he was studying what were the costs that paul had to pay they must have been considerable and paul often had to pay his own way he had to work at his original profession tent maker whatever that was to pay his own way because there wasn't sufficient funds there to pay it cost him personally it cost him finance it cost him time and health and all sorts of other things they're there in the bible for us and that's certainly true of a lot of our missionaries if you just think of your own link mission link with claire beg claire now 10 years on the field in pakistan went out as a young woman she knew there were going to be great costs in that professionally economically she she left a lot she knew as a single young woman going to that work that many single missionary women face that the whole singleness issue was a big one for her in the years ahead and so the costs in terms of material things of personal things of suffering of health of all sorts of other things are often very big issues in the life of a missionary how much does that get reflected in the life of the church here at home of you and me who live in freedom and live comfortably and in some ways often benefit materially because we're christians living in an affluent christian community and church what does it cost us really to be christians and to share in the bold witness of the church and yet they are the characteristics they are the ingredients that lead to the kind of church we've read about here christ-centered am i christ-centered in my life or am i just religious spirit empowered am i open for god's spirit to take control of me and work through me and am i praying that he'll indeed do that with me and my fellow christians in such a way that real things will happen courageous am i really prepared to stick my

neck out and witness boldly have i got the ammunition to do it and if not how can i get it am i prepared to pay the cost in time talents treasure what may be taken from me if i really do decide to do it only with those ingredients will a church be like this as it lives in peace strengthened and encouraged by the holy spirit grow in numbers and the fear of the lord will be evident within it and that's the commitment i ask you to make again today as we pray let us pray father we would want to go in this morning to center ourselves on jesus to acknowledge him as our christ our messiah our king our lord son of god we would want to go in to give our lives to him and undertake that he will be the center of our lives as far as we in our human weakness can make that commitment we would pray afresh for your spirit to work in us and through us to empower us to be your people to live [36 : 57] for you and to witness courageously for you we would afresh commit ourselves to come to understand jesus to know the scriptures and what they mean in practice and lord as we do that in a sense with faltering words we would commit ourselves to the cost whatever that might be for us and we do it in the name of our lord jesus you