

What does it mean to be a Christian? Now there's a broad, sweeping question we could spend a lot of time addressing! I'm sure you could tell me of the changes becoming a Christian has brought to your life – especially if you made that decision a little later in life – after living quite differently for a while in the world.

For me, as well as the confidence and security of knowing my sins forgiven and my future assured, it's a matter of *orientation*. Yes, I'm still prone to fits of selfishness, I know what I like and what I don't – but God is there. The "needle of my compass" is drawn towards him. He shapes and influences my view of the world. He guides the way I do things. I don't mean to suggest that my life is perfectly in tune with God's will. I wish it was! But he's always there, just below my level of consciousness, even when I'm not actually thinking about him.

This morning, as we move further into the Book of Acts, we come to the story of the healing of the man lame from birth at the temple gates. One phrase jumps out at me from the conversation Peter and John had with the man there: "*In the name of Jesus Christ.*" Peter certainly had a brand new orientation.

I read of an incident that took place some years ago in one of those safari parks in Africa. A man was driving along a road when another car came through an intersection and cut him off. He wound down his window, and angrily, and rather blasphemously, yelled to the other driver, "Where do you think you're going, for Christ's sake?" Imagine his embarrassment when Billy Graham wound down the window of the other car, and said, "I go everywhere, for Christ's sake!"

This was Peter's orientation too, after Pentecost. Peter knew he had no ability to heal that lame man himself. But he had great confidence in God. "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk!"¹

It's a great story. It typifies the power that saw the early church burst onto the scene, then grow at remarkable rates. Those first disciples knew they had no resources of their own to do the work of the Church. "In the name of Jesus" they achieved amazing things. This morning, using this story as our framework, I want to look at some *principles* unfolding here, and then some *possibilities* as we apply these principles to the life of our own church. Let's begin by considering

I. Some Principles:

And the first one we see from the story:

A. You Can't Give What You Don't Have.

¹ Acts 3:6b

Every day, friends or family members carried the man who had never walked into the temple courts. It was quite strategic. They timed it to coincide with the time devout Jews headed into the temple for afternoon prayers. Giving alms was highly regarded then as an expression of faith; so those going in to pray were predisposed to be generous.

The man asked Peter and John for money. You can't give what you don't have. Now we know Peter and John had been fishermen. Both men walked away from their livelihood when Jesus called them to follow him. Did they sell their boats to help finance the early church? We don't know. We do know that they had no money with them that day.

Which was just as well for the man! We mustn't move on before noting how Peter finished his sentence. He didn't have what the man asked for; but Peter did have what he really needed. We can't give to others what we don't have either. I wonder, are we ready to consider the treasure we do have, that may just be the real solution to another's needs?

Here's another, related principle:

B. We Have What God Has Given Us.

What Peter and John had, and subsequently shared with the man that day, was not something they had earned, or inherited, or held as their right in any way. It was given to them by God. Paul makes this clear to the Christians in Corinth, who loved to boast about their spiritual gifts, and skite about having better gifts than their neighbours!

Paul wouldn't have a bar of it. And we can learn from his advice. "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?"²

It's a good point! Even those things we like to think we worked hard to achieve... well, who gave us the capacity and opportunity to work? We very quickly trace everything we have, back to God's good and generous hand. The only thing we can legitimately boast about, is how good, and kind, and generous is our God! One more principle:

C. God's Gifts are Given to be Shared.

It's how God works. It's how the early church lived and grew, and profoundly influenced its world and culture. It's how we are effective today (or why we are at times ineffective.)

Peter's amazing ability to speak God's healing to the man that day, would have been meaningless, had Peter not chosen to use what he'd been given, for the glory of God, and of course, to the benefit of that man. And we note the opportunity extended beyond the man

² 1 Corinthians 4:7b

whose life was turned around by their intervention. “All the people were astonished...” we read. I’ll bet they were! This man wasn’t just able to walk. He was “walking and jumping, and praising God!” Peter was given something else to share that day. Once again, he had an opportunity to speak, an audience ready to listen, and some powerful words to challenge and inspire them.

Consider the potential in our room this morning. Reflect for a moment on all God has given you. He gives us good things, because he loves us and wants to bless us. He wants to bless others, too; and a key to this happening is our willingness to share with others what God gives us. I want to spend the rest of our time this morning reflecting on

II. Some Possibilities,

as we consider some of what God gives us, and how we can share it. Look around us. Visitors are quick to notice something we celebrate. God has blessed us as a church with

A. Youth and Vitality.

Now we don’t *a//*have it, of course; (for some of us, it’s a distant and fading memory!) Let me say thank you to our young people for choosing to hang out with us oldies on Sundays! I’m sure you don’t realise how much it means to us. Let me try to tell you.

Firstly, it means we must be doing something right, because you’re still here! It gives us confidence that the church will still be here, and in good hands, when we’re passed doing what we do, (and finished with this life all together!) We love what we see you doing with your faith, and sharing your faith with your friends. Some of us wish we could do it as well with our friends. You’re supposed to look up to us and follow our example. Do you realise we admire you, and we’re challenged by the way we see you living?

OK, sometimes, our musical tastes may be a little different from yours; but hear this, this morning: We don’t want you to change. And we want you to continue to share with us, the things that inspire you. And we love it when you stop and talk to us, and tell us what it’s like to be a Christian where you are today. Youth and vitality. If you have it, can you think of ways to share it? Next one:

B. Special Skills.

Here’s a couple of names for you: Bezalel and Oholiab! Can anyone tell me who they were? God gave these two men special skills in working with various materials to build the

tabernacle as a centre of worship for the Israelites in the wilderness. This has always been God's way. Let me add a name:

Bezalel, Oholiab... and Graeme! In hopefully not too long from now, Graeme will start work on our "tabernacle"; - our extensions. God has given Graeme the skills, and he's spent years developing them, and will now use them, for the benefit of others and the growth of God's kingdom.

We're blessed every Sunday by our talented musicians. Thank you to those who use their special skills in technology at our sound and data desk. Some of you know how to make a very nice cup of tea; I'll be back to sample your skills after our service. Do you have a special skill you can dedicate to God and his service? Next on my list (and the order is fairly random):

C. Financial Independence.

Peter and John had no money that day. Did that mean they went hungry that night? Not according to how I understand the structure of the early church. We read in Acts 4: "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had."³ We first meet Barnabas when he sold a field he owned and brought the proceeds to the apostles.

Things can be a struggle for us, financially. Especially when our children are small, when a parent chooses to take less paid work; and then when the kids hit their teenage years. Then there comes a time, for some of us, anyway, when the financial pressures ease. Our children have grown up and are working. There are fewer hungry people to feed each day. Maybe the nest egg we've been growing for retirement has been boosted by an inheritance. Financial independence is a gift from God; and like his other gifts, can be a blessing to others when we share it. Next on my list:

D. Encouragement.

Now I reckon we all could learn the art of encouragement. Some people seem to be naturally gifted in it. They just have this special ability – is it a gift, or a skill? – to give others a lift whenever they're around. Can you think of someone like that?

I mentioned Barnabas a moment ago. His real name was Joseph. "Barnabas" was a nickname the apostles gave him, which means "Son of Encouragement." Virtually every time we meet Barnabas through the book of Acts, he's encouraging someone. What a beautiful gift! And so valuable to the church. I appreciate those who have been, and are, an encouragement to me. Is this something God has given you to share with others?

³ Acts 4:32

In a similar way:

E. Compassion.

Again, we should all be compassionate. Compassion is one of the stand-out qualities we see in Jesus' life and ministry. It seems to come more naturally to some than others. Some of you helped with the Red Shield Appeal recently. I'm always impressed and challenged by the Salvo's compassion. Their work and their commitment lead them to some fairly challenging people and situations at times.

We see Peter and John's compassion in the story we're considering this morning. They had a legitimate reason for not helping the man who asked for money. They could have said, "Sorry, no money!" and walked on. Compassion prompted them to stop, and help.

So often we read that Jesus was "filled with compassion," or "moved by compassion." His story of the Good Samaritan shows us clearly how important compassion was to him. What a beautiful gift; one that's only evident in our relationships with others. Next, let's consider

F. Wisdom & Experience.

There really are some benefits to growing older! In many ways this is the other side of the coin to youth and vitality we considered earlier. What a blessing to part of a church where youth and vitality are complemented by wisdom and experience! I can't understand churches who, by their structures and outlook, effectively choose one over the other.

As a church, we are where we are today, largely because of the example and wisdom and guidance of our older members. And their encouragement. And their patience and acceptance of some of the changes we've made along the way, that have helped us stay in touch with a younger generation. We miss those no longer with us. Who will step up to take their place? Let's not just grow old! Let's grow in grace and knowledge, and wisdom, so we can become a blessing to another generation, already stepping up to the plate.

This could have been a very long list! That often happens when I launch into something! Let me quickly slip "intercessory prayer" in here (how could I not include this?) As we grow older, and find ourselves unable, or unwilling, to be as involved in some of the other aspects of church life, can we consider a greater commitment to this vital ministry. (Of course anyone can take this up. You don't have to be old...er!) We're nearly there! Next,

G. A Servant Heart.

I often see the same people, serving cups of tea, washing dishes, vacuuming floors, arranging flowers, putting out the bins, putting out music, putting music away, doing those multitude of tasks that somebody has to do. I'm sure I miss much of what takes place behind the scenes, done by people who actually prefer that their work goes unnoticed. Thank you.

On the night before he was crucified, Jesus washed his disciples' feet. He did this, because they had dirty feet! And no-one else was in any hurry to wash them. What an example he set before us! If you have a heart to serve others, there is never a shortage of opportunities! Let's be careful not to "use up" our servants, by taking advantage of their kind hearts.

My last point is a little unusual. I've added to my list,

H. Limitations and Deficiencies!

Over the years I've come to see that God gives us, along with our gifts and abilities, limitations and deficiencies. Wasn't it great that Peter and John had no money that day? What a tragedy if they'd just dropped a few coins into the lame man's bowl and moved on. Their "deficiency" prompted them to consider their assets, and use what God had given them.

Surely there's a lesson here. Years ago I heard some great advice when a speaker told us to work to our strengths; not spend all our time trying to overcome our deficiencies. That's one reason God gave us the church. We need each other. Your strengths counteract my limitations. Together, we become a formidable team.

What has Moses and his staff that turned into a snake, got to do with all this? I could only fit a snippet of this story into our reading this morning, but I think it's relevant!

God called Moses to a very important ministry, and Moses was not confident he had what was required. His response to God was full of "Yes buts..." and "what ifs...?" God in response asked Moses, "What's in your hand?" Never mind what you don't have, what do you have?

I'm not surprised Moses ran away when his shepherd's staff became a snake! I hate snakes, too! To his credit, he picked it up again, when God told him to. And he took his staff, a symbol from his shepherd days, with him as he led God's people through the wilderness. God called Moses, and God doesn't make mistakes. And he places in our hands those things necessary for the tasks he gives us.

That's the challenge I want to leave with you this morning? What's in your hand? What has God given you, in preparation for what he has ahead? Will you run away from it; or will you use it, for his glory, for the benefit of others, and for the growth of his kingdom?