

- Thinking back to last week's sermon, in 2010, I wrote a paper to our FBC leadership. It included a picturesque quotation about the destruction caused by philosophical postmodernism. It read, *"A giant earthquake has shaken the foundations of Western culture, opening up its fault lines and the structures on which it has been constructed. We (the church of Jesus Christ) have a unique opportunity to be cross-cultural missionaries in our own context, gaining insight into maps guiding us as a congregation..."* [p. 57 Roxburgh *Missional Map-Making*]
- I believed that quotation to be true and, now, even more so a years later. In the last decade, many of you folks have answered God's call to be "cross-cultural" missionaries in what some might call our "homeland." You would agree it is good and right to get on a plane and go to a far off land to minister cross-culturally, if that is God's call.
- Thankfully, you would also agree it is good and right to be on mission next door and just down the street, cross-culturally in your own nation, as God calls. You have been willing, and many of you have lovingly sacrificed, to reach people for Jesus who speak the same language but are now, culturally very different in how they think.
- That is how we encourage one another to think, in FBC, as a biblically aligned, free-grace missional church.
- Now, ten years later, I am pointing out what I believe to be another gracious and exciting signal of *reset* from God. It comes at a time when we are even better equipped logistically to move forward in faith on His mission both nearby and far away.
- So, in keeping with my sense of this gracious reset opportunity for FBC and Jesus' church in the US of A, I have a question?

- Has Jesus' church received the gift of other such resets in its history? In other times and places has his church been called to sacrifice and to live in liminality as they are awakening to a new call of God without having all the information they would like to have?
- Has Jesus' church ever had to walk ahead when "new maps" still need to be drawn? If so, what did it *look* like? What might it have felt like to be part of it?
- The New Testament Book of Acts is composed in a unique literary genre for the NT. It's not like the Gospels. It isn't an epistle—not a letter. It is more like the OT books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles. These all provided glimpses of the true history of God's people—events that really happened as they are described in Scripture.
- However, they are not "**history**" written as "*scientific*" historians of recent centuries have claimed history should be written. Traditionally, they have suggested that real history should merely records facts without judgment or attempt to persuade in any way. Of course, historians these days very often don't write history that way—unbiased and un-preaching—especially not after the inroads of postmodern criticism and critical theory.
- Like those OT "history" historical books, Acts is indeed true historical information. However, it is information that is specially selected for a theological purpose. It was not written only to transmit bland historical facts. It was written to provoke thinking and action shaped by those facts from God's Spirit.
- We studied the book of Acts together, a number of years ago. Back then, we recognized this matter of literary genre. We talked about how it might shape interpretation and maybe, even more so, how it might shape our application of the book of Acts to our lives today.

- Just as back then, I remain convinced it is a mistake to take pieces of historical data in books like Acts and move them straight forward, one-to-one, to be applied exactly today, in our current context of the church just as they described the early church when they were written.
- Things change. Contexts are very different from the time of Acts to our day. Maybe, most importantly, we have cell phones and they didn't. Ok, that is *not the most important difference*, but consider what a difference just that one little thing would make to the context of the writing.
- For example, the whole matter of communication and the delay of communicating for the weeks it took a message to travel would have changed the way things operated in the early Jerusalem church and in the wider world, on mission.
- When we take pieces of a narrative found in history that is teaching theology and we automatically apply them directly to every other context in time and space we can very easily misapply them. I think some clearly do this, for example, with Acts chapter 2, and they end up with doctrines such as baptismal regeneration and the absolute requirement to be water-baptized in order to be born again.
- Being subject to self-deception, applications can sometimes be tricky for us to figure out from such contexts. Sometimes, if we like how it turns out for us to apply it directly to us, we simply conclude it must apply. If we don't like it, say when the application was something like we are forbidden from eating lobsters, crab and shrimp, we can easily find ways to exclude that context from our direct application.
- So, for example, now in our current political context, more frequently I hear people again citing 2 Chronicles 7:14 directly to the United States. That's' that verse we love: ***14 If my people, which are***

***called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.*** Are we

sure that we should apply those words from that Israelite context as a one-to-one promise to our America today? That would be nice and be the easiest, cleanest conclusion. If not, can we apply them as a principle? This is not always easy and not always fun. Sometimes we will disagree.

- OK, that is probably enough study of biblical hermeneutics for this morning. BUT, I hope you get the point because I want to take a quick walk through some of the narrative about the First Church of Jerusalem in the book of Acts and I am not suggesting an immediate, one-to-one application.
- Instead, I am doing this in order to flesh out, support and emphasize what I said last week about my belief that God might just send a reset to his church from time-to-time.
- As I said, I believe he has sent an awakening **reset** to cause us to think, to answer some questions—i.e., in whom or what do we really trust as the church of Jesus—I mean REALLY? And, where do we TRULY find our comfortable home as the church of Jesus. Is it this world and its ways and metrics of success or the heavenly realms and God’s ways and measures?
- As I do this today, I am aware and I want you to be aware that I am aware, that we have cell phones and they didn’t. Our context is different. I do not believe we should be applying what the church was like culturally then in a one-to-one relationship to what FBC should be like today as neat and tidy as that might seem it would be.
- On the other hand, I mentioned in passing last week something I learned from a book written by a nephew of the famous prosperity

preacher Benny Hinn. Hinn's nephew, named Costi Hinn, was in the middle of the "family business" of the prosperity church for many years as a younger man. I call it the "family business" because it reminds me of the royal family and what they call "The firm" in Great Britain.

- Costi Hinn came to the knowledge of the truth from Scripture—his story is worth reading although as I read the book, I am not sure he yet understands how utterly gracious our God is.
- After leaving "the family business," Costi Hinn's book answered a question I have never been able to answer about prosperity theology. How do the leaders and teachers square their teaching with so many clear passages in Scripture that say we will suffer? They are not stupid people. They must see the glaring apparent contradiction.
- As I said in passing last week, at least those who follow Benny Hinn offer an explanation that all of that biblical stuff about suffering was for another time in the early history of the church—a different context not ours.
- Well, that explanation certainly raises other biblical issues, but at least they recognize the apparent contradiction and try to explain it.
- However, their attempt also warns me that we must be careful neither to say Acts applies directly to our context today nor to say Acts was only for the context back then and has no possible application now.
- I should settle one other interpretive matter before we move quickly through some narratives in Acts. You probably know this, but let's make sure we all are very aware that when Acts was written there were Jewish people close to the narrative and Gentile people. They were everyone else who wasn't a Jew, from the Jewish perspective.

- Jewish people were, of course those born to, at least, an ethnic Jewish mother and a few outsiders who had converted to the Jewish faith—to the degree that that was ever truly possible. These converts were often not completely accepted by ethnic Jews even if they became circumcised and kept the rules.
- You probably also know that almost all Jewish people hated all Gentile people and vice versa—the hatred and rejection was reciprocal as is most ethnic, racial or tribal hatred.
- Brian Dennert describes this clearly, without going overboard: *“Around the time of Jesus and his first followers, there was ill will and distrust between these two groups. Many of the Jewish people of the time viewed the Gentiles with disdain, labeling them as unclean and sinful people; the Jewish people had been commanded in the Old Testament law to have customs to keep them separated from the other nations and sought to do so, which drew the ire of many Gentiles (especially Romans). Meanwhile, the Romans often disliked the Jews, with the historian Tacitus describing the Jews as hating everyone else, in part because of their customs that separated them from the rest of the nations. There were many lies and false beliefs about Jews that circulated around the time of Jesus, leading the writer Josephus to defend Judaism. Therefore, there was a form of ethnic racism during the time of the early church.*
- One ethnic/racial group thought they were superior to everyone else merely by birth alone. The other group felt this condescending opinion and responded with rejecting the other as feeling falsely superior.
- One can’t help feel the parallels in our more recent history. Cynthia Alease Smith an educator and writer, who is black, concludes: *“(I)n the early days of slavery in America the need to differentiate*

*between poor whites and slaves inculcated an attitude that has not yet been left behind. She writes, : “It was also...to apply the concept of whiteness and blackness to physical bodies and profess the superiority of whiteness through already established definitions of white in religion and elsewhere.....Whiteness and religion, primarily Christianity, and especially as practiced by so-called evangelicals in America is persistent in its belief in a white deity and obedience to it.”*

- Just to be perfectly clear I don't wish to argue for or against Cynthia Alease Smith's conclusions right now. I simply want to suggest that, in our lifetimes, many of us can bear witness to the fact that many white people have tended to feel superior to black people simply by reason of birth. In reciprocation, many black people have rejected white people in a response to what they feel is a sense of unmerited superiority based merely on skin color. These conclusions then were sometimes generalized to the bigger conclusion that all black people and all white people think of one another this way.
- This is not true. In addition, sheer racial animosity over colors is not the full explanation, as some would have us believe. There are often differences in cultures that break along racial lines as well as the fact that people tend to be tribal, identifying more easily with others who are like them.
- Satan has done a good job milking hatred, pain and as much evil out of these reciprocal understandings.
- I suspect if you can picture this in our current culture and you can sense some of the hatred you know this can produce in humans, you can better understand the cultural setting in Acts. Most Jews in Paul's day would, as a matter of course looked down upon, and even despised Gentiles. Almost any Gentile who had contact with Jews

would then despise the Jews as unjustifiably arrogant and evil people.

- This manifested as mutual distrust, mutual smugness, mutual rejection, mutual avoidance when possible, even mutual hatred and mutual aggression in some cases.
- **SO then**...Good thing Christianity entered the world and immediately fixed that hatred and evil, right? No? Well then, good thing God understood the differences between Jews and Gentiles and kept the Jewish Messiah's Church Jewish so that no Jewish believers would need to deny their accepted conclusions and feelings about Gentiles.
- Oh, but what happened when some Gentiles started knocking on the door of Jewish Christianity?
- I am obviously being facetious. The reason I am scanning a part of this example from Acts with you today is because the change from a Jewish Church of Jesus to a Jewish AND Gentile United Church of Jesus was a great, big **paradigm** change for these people—both Jews and Gentiles!
- God awakened the church to this nearly impossible to believe change with a reset of their thinking in the First Church of Jerusalem.
- This was a painful change that came about by God using a number of **RESETS** (as we talked about last week) to get believers to think and then to take a leap of faith trusting God for the changed nature of **their** church instead of continuing to trust what naturally felt comfortable and controllable to them.
- I wish we had time to look at all the wonderful nuances of these gracious resets sent from God to Jesus' Church in Acts. There is a whole progression as God works. There is then also repeated *regression* in God's people to old ways of thinking out of fear and

potential rejection in the Jewish culture. Their self-defined significance as “God’s chosen people” was being endangered!

- If you have time, it might be an interesting study for you to look at the chapters we touch today and next week, in this light, more fully.
- Let’s do what we can do with a more cursory examination of the early **resetting** process in that first church. What might these Jewish believers have felt. How about the new Gentile believers? God was bringing about this paradigmatic flood of change for both to what they *liked* and had accepted their entire lives, as certainly being the naturally **right** way to understand things.
- ***In Acts 2***, the Holy Spirit comes upon the Jewish believers in Jerusalem fulfilling prophecy and showing that this church of Jesus is, indeed, God’s will and work.
- At the same time, from that beginning, the indicators were there for these yet very JEWISH believers. They could miraculously speak languages they had not learned in order that people from all over the world—but still JEWISH—could hear the message they were proclaiming about Jesus their JEWISH Messiah in their own, different tongues.
- Hmm? A new thought for them? Maybe this church thing would be bigger than just them? Maybe the church would not simply be about their Jerusalem ways and preferences. Well, still, as I said, those who heard the other languages and believed were at least JEWISH so that Jewishness of the church remained comfortably under control.
- Three, thousand heard, believed and were baptized in that first evangelistic crusade of the newborn church. If the metric of numbers making decisions was the lone metric for God, the JEWISH church, as it was, was a great success and should just roll on forever.

- Nothing needed to change--nothing ever! What a time to be a part of a growing, successful JEWISH church of Jesus the JEWISH Messiah!
- As the days pass for this successful first JEWISH Church of Jerusalem, JEWISH people are healed in Jesus' name. They get to preach to JEWISH People in as auspicious a place as Solomon's Porch in the Temple area and, there, more JEWISH people believe and are saved.
- As time passes, there are some problems. One is that the public preaching of Jesus as Messiah and LORD is raising the hackles especially of the JEWISH leaders who have made a pact with the "GENTILE devil Rome." There is nearly overnight jail time for some leaders of the church over this, but there is also a miraculous release from jail and from the power of the Jewish turncoats.
- Many JEWISH people, who were from out of town visiting for the JEWISH festival, have now believed. They want to stick around to hear, of all things, sermons, from the JEWISH Bible. There were so many JEWISH people joining the JEWISH church of Jesus community that there was a problem providing food.
- Oh, but the successful JEWISH CHURCH of Jesus does a spiritual, logistical thing and gets the people fed—the more helpless widows and children are fed first just as the JEWISH Law they were used to, commands.
- It was beautiful! I mean it. BEAUTIFUL! In Acts 4: 32-34 we get a report of their success. Some of the metrics of that success we don't like quite as much as others today but, as JEWISH people, they were used to the JEWISH community responding in tough times as JEWISH tradition taught. The report reads:  
***4:32 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.*** <sup>33</sup> ***With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all*** <sup>34</sup> ***that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales*** <sup>35</sup> ***and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.***

- Should that sort of financial sharing be an FBC metric of church success applied one-to-one to FBC today? Some of you would say yes. Others would say no.
- And then, by the way, along the way, when people try to fake this “community sharing heart,” because it might bring them personal significance—make a name for themselves—God simply killed them on the spot. Do we want that one to apply the same way in our context today? Most of us probably don't.
- Sorry, I have to skip ahead! There are many more Jewish people healed physically, many more Jewish people saved in the early days of that Jewish Church of Jesus. Thousands and thousands join them. What could be better? What could be any better an indicator that they were a successful church, in God's eyes? Why change anything?
- It would have been so easy to conclude: *“Lets' keep-er goin!” “This is the right way to be Jesus' church!” “Don't you just love it?!”*
- Well, if a night in jail didn't *reset* their thinking, now Stephen, a godly Jewish deacon is martyred for, of all things again, a sermon, that was simply telling God's truth.
- HMMM???? Said some. *“Maybe something is changing! Open your eyes! Look around! Maybe God wants us to ask some new questions.”*

- Persecution of more JEWISH believers breaks out. Running from it for their very lives, they encounter new people on the roads to safety. They tell them about Jesus the JEWISH MESSIAH.
- Then, in the midst of this new, painful confusion for the still Jewish Church, Philip, another godly deacon ends up in, of all places, “filthy Samaria.” He is talking talking about Jesus to, of all people the “filthy Samaritans” who are—get this now, unbelievably—only ½ JEWISH at best.
- Then he is *magically* transported to talk to an Ethiopian guy who had converted to Judaism but was not really a **real** JEW! “*Hey! Philip! What do you think you are doing?!!*”
- Look, maybe this will all just settle down and we’ll all go back to Jerusalem. We’ll all be the successful JEWISH church we were always meant to be forever and ever. Look, don’t let these hard, painful things that are happening to us change your thinking! Instead, let’s figure out how we can **fix** this back to how it was. (Sorry I don’t have enough time so I’ll finish part 2 in Acts next week Lord willing!!!!)
- Can you believe that maybe their metrics for church success were more often, “It’s what I am used to as a Jewish person. It is what I like, as a Jewish person. It’s what feels successful and significant to me, as a Jewish person. We Jewish people are God’s *chosen* people so a Jewish church must be what God wants. Let’s fix this puppy!”
- I do bet Peter and others felt that and maybe even said that for a time as well! So God sent a reset and then another and another to help them see and change their thinking.
- Unfortunately, some of those who saw the reset and just could not change. Others saw it, changed and changed back. That happens sometimes because there is ALWAYS a price to pay in comfort and

significance and maybe personal preference when moving to a new paradigm—a new way of seeing things that God wants us to see.

- Did you notice so far it was guys such as Stephen and Philip—two **good, servant-hearted** deacons—and it was Peter, an Apostle of Christ, whose stories we are told in this narrative of painful reset?
- Of course, many others were impacted with the pain of the persecution, scattering and the change of the church brought by the reset of God.
- But, sometimes we make the mistake that resets from God are always to be seen as *punishment* for failure of bad people involved in no ministry—or not enough ministry to please God. **Not so!!**
- Very often resets are graciously given to people already actively serving God the best they know how to do it in the *paradigm* they are used to. Resets are given to people who are successful by current church paradigms and comfortable in those paradigms. These good people are the very people God often awakens to jump from there to a new paradigm that moves His plan forward.
- If God has given us a **reset** time in the life of FBC and, if God is asking us to trust Him and to jump, what is left to finish this equation?
- To figure it all out first? Not in that Jerusalem church! Give us the map first and we'll go.
- To figure out how to avoid the need for a jump? Not in Jerusalem! Let's fix this or try to replicate this paradigm just in a new location!
- To figure out how to avoid any pain that might come with a jump?
- To take out on others the fear and pain we feel anticipating a possible paradigm change?
- To figure out how to find another church that doesn't ever talk about jumping to a new paradigm?
- What is left to answer? What is the best answer? In a time of reset?