

GETTING OUT ON THE CUTTING EDGE OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Acts 13–14

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We're looking at the beginning of the fourth major section in the Book of Acts, chapters 1–5, the first section, "The Birth of the Church." In Acts 6:1–9:30: "Persecution Leads to Expansion." Then from 9:31 through chapter 12, "The Acts of Peter and the Beginnings of Gentile Christianity." Those have been the themes that have dominated the first twelve chapters of Acts. Tonight, the fourth section from Acts 13 through Acts 15, deals with "The First Missionary Journey and the Jerusalem Conference." We have called this message tonight, on Acts 13 and 14, for exhortative purposes, "Getting Out on the Cutting Edge of Spiritual Growth." The way to do that, of course, is take on more responsibility than you currently have. To hear the tug of the Spirit challenging you to go beyond your present level of seeming capacity and seeming ability, and get out into deeper water, where you can grow.

We have a view of growth in the Christian life in America that personally I'm somewhat disenchanted with. That is, you grow best by going to a classroom and taking a lot of notes or reading a lot of books and knowing a lot about the subject. Actually, biblical knowledge is on-the-job training. It is getting out in the workplace of Christian life and stretching our faith, stretching our ability to the ultimate. It is when we get in those kinds of situations in our life, where we are pushing ourselves or allowing the Holy Spirit to stretch us, that we do our greatest and have our most rapid growth. So, if you're in a moment in your own life you can look within and ask how the Holy Spirit can grow you in a greater way, then begin to ask, "What borders of your own life does the Holy Spirit want to extend and enlarge?" In what way does He

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want to push you into areas you're not in now? It is in that extra edge of challenge that your greatest growth and most rapid growth will always take place.

When we come to the beginning of Acts 13, we find the year somewhere around 45 or 46 A.D., which means we are now at a period of around fifteen years after the Resurrection. It's a very significant statement because it means that in the first decade and a half of the church, while growing dynamically in Jerusalem, while it had also begun to grow in Judea and Samaria, it's only other place of growth appears to have been this Gentile city of Antioch, 300 miles north of Jerusalem. The standing orders of the gospel, "Go into all the world," at the end of fifteen years, had a very limited focus. In fact, Paul himself at this moment had been a Christian perhaps twelve or thirteen years, and as of yet, had not stepped into the arena of calling which the Lord had placed upon him when he was converted. It was the Lord who had said He would place Paul before governors and kings and Gentiles, and before his own countrymen. To a great extent, that had not happened. He had spent those years in isolation. Most of those years in Tarsus.

We're taught in the Scriptures not to despise the day of small things. Simply because in our own life we may not find ourselves in an arena of activity that seems large, that is not the critical point. It is: Are we at the center of God's will for our lives for this particular moment? If we are, we can then trust the future with God and leave it to Him to push us into greater arenas and then, when He affords the opportunity, we need to go out and step into those. But there were years and years of background and training. That always is the case when God gets ready to do something significant.

Some observations I want to make in terms of getting out on the cutting edge of Christian life.

I'm looking at the first missionary journey as kind of prototype for how we really do grow.

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I. I want to say one of the principles that emerges right away is that we grow best in association with other people.

The gospel is a shared effort. Jesus Christ calls us to a shared life. There are not to be Lone Rangers in ministry, Lone Rangers in the Christian life. I think one of the difficulties we have seen recently in contemporary media ministries is that they have, in a sense, broken off of the biblical pattern of a shared eldership, a shared mutuality of ministry and obligation, and instead, have become one-person operations.

If you look at biblical examples, you will find that, for one thing, the church at Antioch did not have a senior pastor as such. But it had a pastoral team. These brothers were in association with one another—in a dynamic, spiritual association. They were called “prophets” and “teachers,” which meant that some of them had the kind of ministry which laid down the structure and outlines and gave you the whole of a subject, and others were prophets of single shot issues, as the Holy Spirit would have them speak forth. These people, in a context of fasting and prayer, coming from different backgrounds, were forming the stable base of the church. When that church gets ready to undertake the commission of the Holy Spirit to extend the Great Commission, it is not just one of their members that are plucked out to go extend the Christian gospel. It is from the midst of five that two are chosen. And not just any two, but the top two. Which—by the way, parenthetically—in respect to the establishment of churches, suggests again that the way many churches have gone about seeking to build new works has been in reverse to biblical principles. I know by being on a presbytery that the most common thing said to younger ministers is, “If you’re called of God, go out and start a work on your own.” We expect the young people to go do that and thank the Lord they go do it. But the biblical pattern was, “Take the most experienced and seasoned people that you have and send them out.” Let the younger

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people and the less accomplished people remain behind with the mother church, until they get the strength and then send them out. Kind of a unique concept, isn't it?

We wonder sometimes why the New Testament church exploded so mightily. In addition to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they were also using some very sound human methodology. That is, when you're going to do expansive work, send your best. If you're a company and you're going to begin in a new territory, you don't send the rookie salesmen to start the territory. Hopefully, if you're thinking wisely, you send your most experienced salesmen out there and give them the territory. The Early Church was doing that kind of thing.

Also, by the way, the church at Antioch appears to be a very solid church, because they didn't wring their hands and say, "Oh, my! What are we going to do now? We're losing our two key pastors, Paul and Barnabas. We're not going to have that rich exhortation of Barnabas anymore. We're not going to have that didactic teaching of the apostle Paul. We'll just dry up and blow away." It is possible—again, in the American church—we're getting so into a "pastor cult mentality" or "leader cult mentality" that we've gotten used to the idea that the ministry folds when the leader goes away. I submit to you: Is the church built upon human leadership or is it built upon Jesus Christ? Do we owe our allegiance to a person or do we owe it to Christ and to His cause? I think we need to transfer loyalties to the cause and to the kingdom, away from leadership and personality. It's very clear from reading on in Acts 13 and 14 that the church at Antioch wasn't disturbed in the least by the removal from its midst of Barnabas and Saul, it kept on and it grew strong and more powerful than ever.

How do we engage in growth? We find some other people to pray with. We find some other people who will be like iron sharpening iron to us. We do things so we can encourage one

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another together. That's certainly one of the key principles of growth here—not doing it alone.

Finding someone or others who will stimulate you.

II. Another key thing about getting involved in a more rapid spiritual growth is when the Holy Spirit begins pushing us out into areas where we have not been before—He is going to push us out incrementally.

It's going to be step by step. It's not going to be from Point A to Point Z. It's going to be from Point A to Point B, and then to Point C and then to D and E and F and G and all along the way.

One of the reasons why I make that statement is that when Paul and Barnabas were sent out, after the Holy Spirit had spoken through a word of prophecy to the praying eldership of the Antioch church, when they were sent out, they went to the place nearby which was the island of Cyprus.

In fact, that was Barnabas' home area. It was well-known to them. The Spirit did not have them go to Rome, nor to the West Indies, nor to Carthage, North Africa. But He sent them to a place that was immediately nearby. They could handle that. In fact, they even used methodology that was familiar to them; when they got on the island of Cyprus, they preached first in the synagogues. That would become a pattern throughout their ministry.

This is again the case when we're stepping out in the Lord's work. If, for example, you're seeking to become a greater steward of finances God has entrusted to you, generally He will not have you pick up from 10 percent to 90 percent of your income to the Lord's work. He'll probably move you from 10 percent to 11 percent. If you're going to be a more effective witness, it isn't that you're going to be suddenly preaching to a hundred people. It may be that you're doing a more effective job bringing the children in your neighborhood to church with you. If you're interested, as a younger person, in the possibility of opening your life in missions, it may not involve going to a foreign country at all. It may involve finding a needy ministry to

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disadvantaged or handicapped or minority people right here in our own backyard, and starting there first. I know when every summer comes around and we as a pastoral staff are talking with young people who are going out for summer foreign missionary internships, one of the questions we ask before we support is, “What are you doing already here in ministry?” We don’t want a person to simply see ministry overseas as ministry and not see what they do here as ministry. So they start out in the place nearby.

III. Another key principle that happens in growth is that we can always expect that there will be opposition or difficulty in fulfilling God’s will.

That is especially an underlying theme that runs throughout the first missionary journey and all of Paul’s ministry. The difficulties come in many different ways. Unforeseen things. We start out, and our hearts are beating wide and we’ve been touched by the Lord. We’ve prayed it through. We’ve got encouragement of people who’ve laid hands upon us or said, “God be with you.” We’ve gone out and found things different than what we’d imagined. Many times, we found them to be not as glamorous as the idealized vision of the will of God which we started with. Some of the unforeseen things that happened to Paul and Barnabas, for example: They get on the island of Cyprus and they meet a Roman proconsul, whom they can have a ministry to. By the way, Luke is very accurate as an historian, and he understands the difference between a procurator and a proconsul. In Palestine and Jerusalem and Caesarea by the Sea, there was a Roman procurator because procurators were appointed by the Roman emperor. You had a procurator over a territorial area that was difficult to govern and was notably seditious in its population. So you needed stronger, centralized governmental control. Those were procurators like Pontius Pilate. But in areas that were tranquil and peaceable and went along with the rule of

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Rome, then you had proconsuls, which were appointed, not by the Emperor, but by the Senate of Rome.

Here you have in Cyprus a proconsul by the name of Sergius Paulus. Paul's getting ready to have a wonderful time witnessing to him, and then the unexpected occurs. A Jewish occultist, a strange kind of combination, appears opposing him. This man was a chief advisor to Sergius Paulus. It was something Paul hadn't expected. There are going to be lots of things that happen to him on this trip that he didn't expect. He's going to have to find a way to overcome them. It's strange how he overcomes this particular situation. He, through prayer, inflicts blindness upon Elymas, the sorcerer. This is a very unusual miracle, because if you look at the miracles of Jesus and the apostles, it's the only one that I can identify that is destructive toward a person. All the other miracles are restorative. Eyesight is restored. Lame limbs are restored. Hearing is restored. Miracle power is not used to inflict punishment on someone in some way. But here is the exception.

Why does it occur? I think it occurs because Paul knows the value of not having your sight. When he was converted, he lost his sight for three days, and in that period of blindness, he came to spiritual sight. So maybe he has a special gift here of having the faith of people who are blinded and come to sight. So he's not hesitant to use it on Elymas, the magician. It's the only time he uses the destructive power of supernatural ability. But that's the way he copes with it. John Mark does not cope as well with the unexpected. John Mark has been picked up to go along with Barnabas and Paul, and he's happy, until they come to Perga. Perga is a 100 miles to the north of the island of Cyprus. It's on the coast today, the middle point of central Turkey. Perga is a sea-level kind of area. From Perga, Paul will scale up the 3,600 mountain plateau of greater Galatia, where there would be Antioch and Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe, towns that Paul

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will minister in. Rather than making that trip up through the swollen mountain streams of robbery-infested country, John Mark leaves. There are all kinds of suppositions as to why he leaves. One of them, I think, is very interesting. When you pick up Paul's letter to the Galatians, you find Paul saying, in chapter 4, that the reason why he first came to Galatia, which is here in Acts 13–14, was "because I was ill." And he said, "You would have plucked out your very eyes and given them to me" (Galatians 4:15). If we read between the lines, we may suggest that in the lowlands of Perga, on the coast of central Turkey, Paul had picked up a bug or a malaria kind of disease, which was very common in those swampy areas. The way you got out of that in biblical times was, you went up into the mountain areas, the higher regions where you could escape the impact of that devastating illness. John Mark was saying, "I think we ought to go home. Paul, you're sick! What do you mean going up through those robber-infested areas?" And besides, John Mark was a relative of Barnabas, and when Barnabas and Paul had left Antioch, it was said that Barnabas and Paul went. But by the time they have gone to the isle of Cyprus, it is no longer Barnabas, number one, and Paul, number two. It's Paul and his company. Notice: "Paul and his companions" (Acts 13:13, NIV). Barnabas isn't even mentioned, although there's just the two of them along with John Mark. John Mark's saying, "See if my relative is going to be pushed around like that! And besides, I miss mother." His mother lived in Jerusalem. We know that from Acts 12. So he's got three reasons for flying the coop: Paul's sick and pressing into this dangerous area; his relative, Barnabas, has been demoted; and he's possibly homesick. Things haven't gone his way, and he splits. Some of us don't always pass our test of welcoming things happening to us.

Of course, Paul has a lot of other things happening here that are not welcome. Such as when he finishes preaching in Pisidian Antioch and a few weeks go by and the opposition in the town is

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so violent against him that he has to leave. Then he goes to Iconium, and the same people come down there, and the opposition is again upon him. Initially, he stays, but then he leaves. Then he goes to Lystra, a town that is still up on that plateau range. At Lystra, he is pelted with rocks and left for dead outside the city. That certainly was not a happy day in his life. So he had things happen to him that were quite unexpected.

Part of getting out on the cutting edge of spiritual life is responding well when we have things happen to us that we don't like. One of the things I notice about the apostle Paul is that he had many unpleasant things happen to him, which are catalogued in 2 Corinthians 11, and he never blames God. He never misreads the events of life as though they were a signal, somehow, telegraphing to him the idea that God might have been displeased with him. He simply treats negative events for what they are, without confusing them somehow with the idea that God Himself had turned against him. Nor does he ever blame God for the adversities of life. And he had every cause to do that. He could have said, "Lord, here I've put myself to this trouble and I've been preaching for You, and it's not fair that I'm kicked out of cities. And especially Lystra, that isn't fair. I had the gift of faith operating through me and a man who was crippled from birth stood up and walked, and then You allowed me to be brought near to death. You could have turned those stones into marshmallows. I don't think that's any way to treat one of Your apostles."

One of the things we have to learn in the Christian life is that there's no special treatment that is accorded us for being a Christian. In fact, I think it's a rule. You may argue, if you'd like. But I think it's a rule, that the more you get involved in spiritual growth and ministry, the more strongly you are going to be assaulted. Someone said, "The higher the flag flies, the greater the wind blows." It's kind of a rule. If you want to be used of God, get set. Things often aren't going

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to go the way you expect them at all. Your response is critical, especially the response to stay free from a blame-filled life, either blaming God or blaming someone else or even blaming yourself. But simply get up and keep going.

IV. Another thing that I think is really key to keeping on the cutting edge of spiritual growth is exemplified in the first missionary journey in the phrase “They were filled with the Spirit.”

It’s used on several occasions. One is in Acts 13:9, with Elymas, this magician, the sorcerer—“Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, ‘You are a child of the devil’” (NIV). He was filled with the Spirit. Then, at the end of chapter 13, when they were at Antioch and Paul had finished preaching his first sermon that we have recorded. He’s kicked out of town because of persecution. It says, again, “And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 13:52, NIV).

We noted this earlier on in the first section of Acts, that the words “filled with the Spirit” refer to broader dimensions of experience with the Spirit than simply the baptism in the Spirit. It is used to describe those occasions in life when we have new stresses, when our capacity is being stretched as it has never been stretched before and we have, therefore, more room to receive the Spirit. I have more need of the Holy Spirit in my life today than I did when I was sixteen, because I’m responsible for more today than when I was sixteen. And I need the Holy Spirit to the level of my capacity now, not of when I was sixteen. That is not enough to last me today. It’s like, as we continue to grow in responsibility, the Lord gives us—we just keep getting transferred to bigger and bigger pitchers or containers or pails or however you want to describe it, that holds water or liquid. We need more of that presence of the Holy Spirit to fill the present container of our life, so it’s appropriate when we face stresses and challenges, and we can open

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ourselves in new ways to depend upon the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit, when the growth demands are placed upon us, we won't succeed.

V. Another thing that is key to spiritual growth, that's found in the text, is that there appears to be a flexibility in life that's really essential for a growing Christian.

That's why we cannot simply get somebody's textbook that tells us "when this happens, you do this." If we look, for example, at Paul's responses to things, we'll find different responses—like in regard to persecution. It is mentioned that at Antioch and Pisidia, when persecution came, he left. But at Iconium, when the persecution broke out, he concluded that he was going to stay for a while. So on the one hand, he says, "I'm going to leave," and the next moment he says, "I'm going to stay." He keeps an unpredictable response to life when he is left for dead at Lystra. Instead of fleeing that city, he goes back in the city, then goes down to Derbe, turns around, and goes back through each of the cities where he had been kicked out of town, and ministers. He has courage to go back. Courage to embrace suffering. He remains unpredictable in his life-responses.

Another thing that really attracts me, as a key to his staying on the cutting edge of spiritual growth, was that he didn't get thrown off kilter when something terrible happened, after some great victory. Last week, I noted, as we looked at the difficult will of God, that as is so often the case, trials are simply meant to precede victories. Sometimes, however, victories precede defeats. The greatest miracle that had happened up to this date in Paul's ministry was the healing of this lame man at Lystra. Yet immediately afterwards, he had this terrible assault perpetrated against him, and he was left for dead. What is God doing in these moments? We just kind of have to hang on, don't we? And trust Him. And believe in Him. That He is going to carry us through those kinds of times.

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“Don’t be surprised,” Peter says, “at the fiery trial you’re experiencing, because it has come to test your faith, to determine whether or not it is genuine” (1 Peter 4:12).

VI. The last thing I want to note as a quality for staying on the cutting edge of spiritual growth is that it requires us to look at what God is doing in us in all of life.

What is God doing within our life when we are out doing things for Him? When the first missionary journey is completed, the church has been founded in areas of the world it had not previously exhausted. But the greatest thing to me that happened on the first missionary journey was the new depth that had come into Paul’s life. In writing to the Galatians—the people in the churches he had founded on the first missionary journey, in Acts 13–14—he talks to them about the fruit of the Spirit, for example. He says, “The fruit of the Spirit is love and joy and peace and endurance (or patience) and kindness and gentleness and long suffering and goodness” (Galatians 5:22).

Where do these kinds of qualities grow best? How do they develop best in our life? My idea of the fruit of the Spirit for a long, long time was that you get these qualities in life if you have time to be contemplative. You get these qualities in life if you’re not under a lot of stress. I find I’m a more loving person when I’m under less stress. Is that true of you? I am a more joyful person when I don’t have as much responsibility. I can endure more when there’s not so much to endure. I can be good and have goodness when all the people around me have goodness. So the fruit of the Spirit would seem logically to flow best out of a kind of life situation where we have pleasant contexts. It’s sort of like if I see the fruit of the Spirit as natural to a life down on the blue grass of Kentucky with white fences and the horses grazing in the pasture and in the mid-afternoon, you bring out the lemonade and sit down in the lawn chairs and drink pink lemonade on white picnic tables while seated on the beautiful green grass. Then you talk in wonderful,

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expansive terms about “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, gentleness, goodness, long suffering, endurance, kindness,” and all those kinds of things. But in actual fact, that is not where the quality of the fruit of the Spirit is best developed. It’s best developed under fire.

Paul was able to reflect this, because in the Galatian experience, he had been pressed to the wall, time and time again. In fact, when he is going back through all those towns where he had founded churches, he says to them very explicitly, in verse 22—a very different message than the kind you’ve heard on Christian television a lot in the last few years—he says that we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God. He knew what that was like firsthand. People had watched him respond firsthand to those adversities and seen a miraculous presence of life flow out of him that could only be accounted for by the fact that he had kept a close bond to God. The fruit of the Spirit came out of him. When he was pelted with rocks at Lystra, he didn’t stand back up and with what little life that was left within him and say, “I’m going to get you guys for this! We’re going to come back to this town and we’re going to organize the voters and we’re going to throw all you people out of office. Better yet, we’re going to lock you all up. You’re a bunch of crazies and sickos!” He had a marvelous ability to respond kindly and lovingly, without threat or violence or force of any kind.

It brought him into a deep walk. And not only did those internal qualities grow within him, but there are people who are always observing us in our down times. We know that one of the persons that observed Paul at Lystra, and who was perhaps in that crowd, was a young person that saw the miracle and saw the stoning, a young man by the name of Timothy, who had an unsaved dad and a devout mother. Like any child out of a mixed religious home, if he’s a male, by the time he hits seventeen or eighteen, he is really struggling with whether to go with his mother’s faith or his dad’s secularism. He sees this person who had so much power that a lame

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man would be made well. But he also saw, and I think was more deeply impressed by, how he handled the stoning and how, when they brought him back in the house at Lystra, he saw the man praying for his enemies and praying that God would establish a church in that town, no matter what. That moved Timothy's heart, and later Timothy would become a trusted ally and companion to the apostle Paul, because his discipleship and walk of faith was being formed in those days when Paul was under severe pressure.

When we're under severe pressure, what is happening in our life transfers out as a blessing to others, also. So God is doing good things in us if we'll respond to Him when we're going through those moments.

Paul comes back to the church at Antioch and does a marvelous thing. He tells them, the Scripture says, all that God had done (verse 27) and how He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. And by the way, it's noted in verse 27 that upon arriving there, they gathered the church together. One of the things I think desperately needs to be revived in the contemporary church is the sense of wanting to hear what God is doing elsewhere in the kingdom of God, and the church being gathered to hear the report of what God is doing elsewhere. Yet when they made the report, there is no slick glossy brochure that puffs their personality or puffs their ministry. Notice how wonderfully they put what God had done. It does not say, "They reported to the church all they had done and the miracles they had experienced and all they had suffered." They simply report all that *God* had done. The emphasis is not upon our accomplishment but upon the Lord's accomplishments and the Lord's work. And when our focus is in that direction, God's work can prosper and be blessed, because people involved in ministry don't honestly care who gets the credit, as long as God gets the credit. And the honor of the blessing goes to Him.

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A journey of a year or two we've covered in half an hour. That's a shame. We're trying to extract the basic principles in our life. Do you want to see God more greatly at work in your life? What's He laid upon your heart to do? Has he laid upon you some call, some inner motivation? The apostle Paul, for example, had a definite inner call. Has He put something upon you? Or has He simply thrust an opportunity in your lap? Maybe an opportunity as simple as inviting people who are non-Christians to next Sunday morning's worship service. That's a mission field all by itself. That's something the Lord would be pleased with. Let's get out on the growing edge of our Christian life. Get out of just the perspective of thinking we grow if we read the Bible fifteen minutes a day or sit under XYZ illuminating speaker, read marvelous books or listen to marvelous media teachers or evangelists. The real growing edge is when we, in our own personal life, get out there and get on the line of Christian service in some particular kind of way and let God grow us while we're doing that.

We'll find that whenever we do that, God's kingdom will be considerably different from the time we end that particular adventure than from when we started. Because when Paul and Barnabas started out, there were no churches in Cyprus, in Antioch and Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. By the time they're done, there are churches in all of those places.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, we want to be in the same threshold of victory and challenge as the church was when it perched, in Acts 13, on the edge of the beginning of a great new expansion. We want to be in that place, Lord, in our own personal life. To believe You for potential, to be realized through our responding to the Holy Spirit and His laying His call anew upon us. Stretch us, Lord. Place us in areas where we would have never gone on our own. We may never have had the courage or the imagination to do that. Open our eyes, Lord, to Your call. Help us not to sit forever on the

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Great Commission, as the Jerusalem church did. Help us to come under the power of the Holy Spirit, to reach out and, in reaching out, experience growth in our life. We ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen.