

Fellowship in the World or in Church

By Paris Reidhead*

Will you turn, please, to Acts, Chapter 12. How wonderful it is to have a story to tell Redeemer's dying, delivering love. And that is what we find in this 12th Chapter of Acts. I am going to read it for you. It is not only a revelation of principles which we will be considering, but it is also the unfolding of biography, men that sought to serve the Lord:

Please read: Acts 12:1-25

Now I would like to title this, Fellowship in the World, or in Church. We have probably in this portion a clearer, sharper contrast between the principles of the world and the fellowship it offers, and the principle of the church and the fellowship that it offers, than we will find anywhere else in the Word of God. And we also not only see the principles set forth clearly, but the practices that rise up from, and flow out of these principles. Now you will understand that this has to do with Herod. Herod was of that family, one of his ancestors had been king at the time of when our Lord was born, and now many years later there still is one of that king's descendants upon the throne, and ruling.

Now he was a minor king. King is the word that is used and is correct, but remember he was under the Emperor of Rome, and was responsible to work with the Jews. He Himself was part Jewish, just enough so that he had great respect for the Jews, and their religion. He had great respect for the Temple and sacrifices, and its ordinances. They had great respect, as you see here. Peter was taken, and because they were the seven days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, he would not have him tried or executed, and this was good, because it allowed the church to gather and have a time of prayer together. But at the same time that Herod was interested in trying to please, the Jews, he was also just enough not Jewish so that he was very interested in all the honors and wealth that could come to him from serving Rome. He was a close personal friend of Caligula, little boots, the almost insane emperor that did so much to damage the prestige the prestige of Rome and hasten its fall and disintegration. He was I said put up.

First, well he was a strange man. He was imprisoned at one time, and then he was just invited into Roman society, then he would be imprisoned again, and finally he ended up on the throne ruling in this part of the world under Caligula at the time.

And so here is one that represents, epitomizes the world, all that it stands for, and all that it offers. He seems to have gathered. He has gathered honor, he has gathered power, he has gathered possessions, wealth, and influence, and he still remains on good terms with organized religion. I am sure that he used his relationship to Israel to good advantage whenever there was political necessity, a wise, sagacious individual that felt that having gained favor with the Jews by killing James, the brother of John, that he ought now to proceed to really please the people by offering them Peter.

We see in this worldly principles and practices set forth in the context of expediency, and the testimony of what can be accomplished by it.

Notice first that Herod isn't interested in the right. He is not interested in truth, nor justice. These aren't matters of concern to him. It wasn't a question, Had James done anything worthy of death, or was it right to slay him according to Roman law, was it just to slay him — this did not enter into it at all. It was advantageous to do it. It was expedient to do it. He did it because he was going to curry favor with the Jews. This became now a political instrument, one that he used out of selfishness, seeking a selfish end without any regard for the rights of James or the will of God, whom he pretended to revere and serve. This is after all a principle of the world. It is that right is profitable, and truth is what is advantageous, and justice is what works advantage. And this isn't hard to see. It is not hard to find, and we will discover and you become acquainted with the passing of society and its various phases that ungodly men have to have every safeguard to protect them. We find one place where this isn't so. I am always amazed, and I realize that the stock market is carried on with a basis of fingers, and signs, and gestures, and little signals which will make or break the one that is having his property bought or sold, and there is only once, if once, that there has ever been a violation of a contract thus signaled.

But other than that, it seems as though businessmen count on the fact that there is right, and truth, and justice are hardly the foundations of business. And so elaborate contracts that furnish careers for lawyers, a never ending stream of them being needed in order to protect predatory men from each other seem to be more or less the rule of all societies. And it is the rule of the world, because the world is “controlled by a prince other than our Lord, one of whom He said, he has nothing in me,” and we must recognize this, and we must realize this. (John 14:30) And furthermore we must realize that if you are going to get on in this world, and have its smile of approval, and have its endorsements, it is going to be necessary for you to give lip service to right, and then consider that right is whatever works; give lip service to truth, but truth is whatever is accepted; give lip service to justice, but justice is only done when you cannot get by with injustice. Now you say, you are very cynical aren't you? No I am not cynical. It is just that I have some insight into the character of the one who has established the principles of the world system. And the Bible says that “he is a liar, and has been a liar from the beginning,” and his children, all that follow him, are to share their daddy's nature and daddy's character. (John 8:44) And you have seen yourself, and you have seen yourself and you have seen yourself worthy of the Savior's dying love, of the Savior's sacrifice. Well if you understand what you were when you came to Christ, then you understand what others are who have not come to Christ, and the kind of a society that is organized without Christ at the center. And so the fellowship of the world is what the world demands, that it be on the basis of its own definition and principles.

Then we see another thing that is quite apparent. The unscrupulous use of any means by which the wished for end can be attained. The employment of craft or violence is just a tool in the hands of Herod. He is going to use craft. He is going to use it because this is how he has survived. This is how he has come to the place of power; all that he has achieved he has achieved on this end. He has stepped on heads, and necks, and climbed up on this shifting ladder to this place of eminence, and so when he finds that his popularity is waning just a little bit with the Jews, and so this is a simple thing for him to say, Well what would help, endear me to them and them to me? And his answer? Well let's sacrifice a Christian. Who is handy? James, the brother of John. And so sword flashes, and James head rolls in the dust, and the Jews applaud and say, Wonderful. Here is one that is on our side, that is committed to exterminating the church. Obviously, another tool that he uses beside craft and violence is an utter contempt for the feelings of others. He isn't interested in how the Christians might feel. He is not interested in how honest men who serve under him might feel. He is not interested in how certain of the Jews who were aware of the dishonesty that was used in condemning the Christians might feel. His only concern is, How can he further substantiate his position? And since selfishness is the end of all of his life then he has to have contempt for the feelings of others.

And there is a disregard for the happiness of individuals, or communities of individuals which stand in the way. Here is a growing part of the population which are standing for something to which he isn't particularly personally opposed, but politically it is a tool he can use. So he is perfectly willing to let the children of Christians scream in terror and run to their mothers when they hear his name. He is perfectly willing for them to have to hide in cellars, and bury themselves out of sight. Because he has no... he utterly disregards the happiness of others. And then of course he has no regard for God's will or God's plan. He takes everything into his own hands. He is his own God, ordering his own destiny. He may pay lip service to the God of Israel, but that is all.

Now those are the principles that you will find everywhere in the world. You work in the world, and this is going to be part of it, part and parcel of it. And so if we understand this, we don't need to be cynical. We simply need to realize that everything other than this has had another source. If there is honesty, and there is to some degree, if there is patriotism and there is to some degree, if there is fairness and charity, it has certainly not had its origin with the prince of this world, because these that I have outlined to some degree are the representation of Satan and the government that he holds and the principles that he wishes to establish. Society has of course had to engineer its own survival by passing certain laws that are going to protect itself from the utter brutality and destructive purpose of Satan. But nevertheless these principles prevail in the world of which Satan is the god and the guide.

There is one basic analysis of this, one essential that we can set forth, and we will see it. The world is organized on the principle of self will as the government, and self-seeking as the end. Self-will as the government — I'll do what I want to do, and self-seeking is the end. Well this is not a very pleasant picture of the world, and it isn't to this degree perhaps in your community. You say, Well I know unsaved people. I know unsaved people that do not measure up to this description. Yes, but probably

their grandfathers were earnest Christian, or their Great Grandfathers were under the influence of Moses. The secondary influences of the Gospel have we are happy to say penetrated into our culture to some degree to ameliorate the sheer savagery of it. But if you want to see this in its awful outworking then go into New Guinea, and see there these principles that are incarnate in society now where the first invasions of the Gospel are breaking the awful hold that the world has upon the minds and hearts of men and women.

Now in utter contrast, complete contrast, will we see the church or Christian principles and that which united those.

First, just in contrast, we see that the Christian is committed to do the will of God, to seek the will of God, irrespective of self-interest and self-will. This is how he became a Christian. He discovered the principle of selfishness, and self-will to be treason against just and proper government of God, that in serving Satan and listening to the guided counsel of Satan, he was in open warfare with God, and so he has repented. He has changed his mind about whose counsel he will follow, and whose government he will obey, and he has renounced Satan and the world principles that Satan has inculcated, and he has committed himself to God. And it is this that has opened the door for grace. And so a Christian of necessity has to be one that has embraced the will of God, irrespective of his own interests or his own plans.

We have to have some common grounds for Christian fellowship, and we see it now here in contrast. The world committed to self-will, the world committed to self-pleasing as an end, as a governmental policy and principle. And so we find in contrast, the Christian is committed to the will of God. He is committed to the purpose of God for his life. He has accepted it and received it.

Then we further find that the Christian is committed to love all men. This word *love* is so abused. Our present connotation of the word is sentimentality that is being constantly nourished by the literature and the music of the day. But in the Bible, the word love is far deeper than a mere expression of sentiment. It has to do with the total personality seeking noble ends. God loves the world, and all that God desires the best for the world, greatest happiness, highest good, blessedness; God loving means that everything that God is is brought to focus in this end of getting for those whom He loves the very best that they can have. If it is life, then He loves them to the point of even offering His Son that they might have eternal life, not only endurance of life, but also fullness of life. God loves, and therefore all that God is is committed to the end of seeking the best interests of others. In contrast to what we have seen as the characterizing of the world and its principles, which is selfishness, self-pleasing, as the end of being. Neither right, nor truth, nor justice, nor the feelings of others, or the happiness of others, is a factor in the world. It is the complete opposite for the Christian. He is committed to seek the best of others even at his own expense. To love all men is to desire their highest good and greatest happiness.

Then, of course, in contrast to the opposite side of this a Christian is committed to work ill to no man; that is, it many seem to be. A father that chastens his child may seem to be rather stern and very likely he is, and very likely he needs to be. And I don't think that generally speaking in the Christian community there has been evidence of an over use of the rod. Maybe the children have been spoiled by an under use of it. But the fact is that when a child is chastened by a zealous, earnest, concerned parent, he recognizes that the Scripture is right when it says, "No chastening at the time seems pleasant." (Heb. 12:11) And so it is that it might be that he has appeared to work ill, it might be that it is necessary sometimes for a Pastor to reprove or rebuke, or exhort. Of course, this is something that he is supposed to have completely abandoned in the day of Dale Carnegie and 20th century psychological mechanisms by which one gets along. But God still says, "Reprove, rebuke and exhort, with all long suffering and godliness." (II Tim. 4:2)

And so it might be when somebody, when someone in charge of pastoral responsibility reproves that the one reprovved is going to calumniate and argue and vilify, but nevertheless God has said it, and it might appear to be ill, but if it is offered in love, the one will have to stand.

So to work ill, has got to be on the terms of the intent. It may be that you are responsible to serve as a priest to someone, and go to that person and say, Dear Sister, Dear Brother, I am concerned, greatly concerned about this is in your life, about this in your actions and your attitudes, and I would wish you would think and pray about it and do something about it. This is true. A Christian is committed to work ill to no man. He is, however great the, gain may be, it may be greatly to your advantage

sometime to hurt, you have committed yourself in coming to Christ never to use injury, never to use violence, or anything else to secure your own achievements.

Then a Christian is committed to endure evil meekly and patiently. Obviously the church is committed to its own discipline. The Scripture said, If you do not put out sooner or later you are going to have to get out, and God has charged the church and the eldership of the church to the responsibility of discipline and it can endure evil from without, but certainly not from within.

But from without, from the world system when Satan has stirred up persecution, and stirred up opposition, and as in the case of James, he is taken, and sentenced to die, you find no organization of the Christians as did Peter that night when our Lord was taken, drawing a borrowed sword which he hardly knew how to handle, or which end to hold, and striking only to sever the servant of the high priest's ear. Not very good aim. He was better at casting a net than he was wielding a sword. And he utterly misunderstood the defense that was to be used of the Lord and of his people, and so he felt that this would probably have to be the way.

But now we discover that Peter has not led this company of believers into insurrection and organization, and to a meeting, What are we going to do about Herod? They have simply accepted the fact that God in His sweet and wonderful grace has allowed them to be tested and tried, and so meekly and patiently they submit to Him. We are committed to that. As Christians this has been our order from the Lord.

Then there is of course another principle that is equally important, and that is, We are committed to help and comfort each other in the time of need. And I wish that we could implement this even further. I am certainly troubled by the fact that in a city such as ours for instance charity has been taken out of the hands of the church, perhaps it is because of the failure, although there are many reasons that I can't go into. But the fact still remains that the charity that we see that's now administered in the name of the society and the name of the community had its origin in the Gospel of the grace of God. And I'll assure you of this, you go into society which is organized around the domination of Satan, and the control of the god of this world, you will find precious little charity. And I wonder if this does not sometimes mean since the society takes care of the poor, and the needy and the sick among us, if we do not fail to recognize that there are other needs that society can't take care of. Oh, how wonderful it would be if it were not just one or two in a church, but if every member of the fellowship, and every member of the Body of Christ, and every Christian were to count it their responsibility to comfort those that are besieged.

Can people come to you and can they explain their problems to you? And can they share their burdens with you? Can they? Oh, you are committed to this.

Now let us see it again. You are committed to do the will of God, irrespective of your own ends or your own interest; you are committed to love all man, desiring their greatest good and highest happiness. You are committed to work ill to no man under any circumstances for your own advantage. You are committed to submit to evil meekly and patiently, not organizing retaliation, and insurrection. You are committed to help and comfort others in their time of need. And then of course, you are committed to leave in God's hands the care and the protection of His own.

Peter is in prison. They love Peter. He has been the instrument of blessing. He is undoubtedly the leader of this small company of believers, and Peter has been taken. They have every reason to be frightened. They have every reason to be disturbed.

Now I have sometimes wondered why it was that God let James die as he did, the brother of John. It must be that his work was finished. Undoubtedly it was. In God's sovereign plan and purpose, James had achieved in God's economy all that God intended. And so it was just that the Lord, can we say, was lonesome. Time for James to come home. For James to live was, Christ; to die was gain. He had no fear of Herod's sword, and I am sure he didn't flinch as it flashed through the sunlight that morning as it fell upon his neck.

I am confident that James was prepared to go. He had seen the Lord. He knew He was alive, and He knew that to be absent from the body was to be present with the Lord. I have often wondered why it was that He did not let this happen to Peter. Peter was apparently so important in God's plan, and God's economy. And so He allowed Peter to be taken by the same man

who had taken James, and by the man that intended to do to Peter what had been done to James. Peter was kept in prison. Isn't it marvelous that Herod didn't time it right, but God did, and Peter was taken on the day before the feast of unleavened bread, and that Herod was a man that was committed to try to respect Jewish law, to uphold Jewish good opinion, and aren't you glad. I am. I am so glad that God just arranged the timing so that when Herod did it, they had first the experience of James, what had happened, and this pressed them to prayer. And then they had the fact that Herod had respect for the feast of unleavened bread, and would not do anything until this sacred day - these sacred days were over.

And so what did they do? Again did they get up a petition? No. Did they organize? No. Did they go outside the city and get spades and swords, and distribute them among them? No. Did they picket? No. What did they do? They went to prayer. They were not all in this one house, because there was another group of the disciples somewhere in another house. Peter says, "Now you tell James and the brethren what has happened." And he left town. I think he was wise. If I were he, I would have thought that a change of scenery would have been healthy at that particular time, that he didn't think that it would be too wise to stay for the next train, so he left that night. And I am rather glad he did, too, because it shows to us that God can supernaturally deliver him, but He expected Peter to recognize that there was a course of wisdom here.

The church was at prayer. How long? Seven days. There were other meetings as I have said, but this particular one was the group where they were "without ceasing, praying to God for the deliverance of Peter." Now the question you'll have to answer is this, Was there not an angel available for James. And the answer of course is, Yes. Couldn't an angel have delivered James just as much as he delivered Peter? And the answer of course is, Yes. But why didn't He? Again we come back to the fact that God has established a principle, and established a practice of working in response to prayer.

This would be a wonderful time, if it were not for the limitations that I feel imposed upon me, to talk about prayer releasing God to work. But I want you to know that it is imperative that you pray for your children, and imperative that you pray for your families, imperative that you pray one for another, because God has sovereignly ordained that intercessory prayer releases Him to work. I do not understand all there is to know about it by any means, but I am confident of this that with your unsaved loved ones until you intercede, until you legally represent them before God He considers His hands are tied. He considers that he has no right to work. And so the first thing God does when He would bring someone to Christ is to stir someone's heart to pray for that person. And thus afford Him the legal right to work in that life. And so the church is now giving to God the legal right to work in Peter's behalf. This is the purpose of intercession, not to change God's mind, not to persuade Him. It isn't that God has a scales here of on the one hand He has a weight of love, and the other a weight of reluctance, and if you pray enough then gradually the weight of love gets heavy so that it brings the scale out of balance. That isn't it at all. It isn't that. You aren't persuading God, and you aren't proving to Him that it is wise. You aren't arguing with Him that it is right in any sense. You are simply affording Him the legal opportunity to work, because remember it isn't only God and man but it is God and the powers of darkness and man. And remember that Satan is the prince of this world, and Herod is his representative, and God has said that kings and governments are the servants of God. And in a sense Herod has a right as a king and a servant of God to kill Peter, and Peter has been commanded of God to submit to Herod. And so, since God has ordained government, God has ordained authority, and God has ordained prayer, we now have the introduction of intercession as affording to God the legal right to contravene His servants in society. And as the church goes to God in intercessory prayer, thus the Lord is afforded by their intercession, by their entreaty, the grounds on which He can work.

There wasn't such apparently in the case of James, and furthermore God's purpose and plan for James was complete. But God's purpose and plan for Peter was that the church pray, and the church intercede. And thus they were working out God's intent, and God's desire, and God's plan.

Now seeing this, we recognize that the angel of the Lord is just as close to you as he is to Peter. I wonder if you realize that. When we speak of the angel of the Lord, we are not speaking about the Lord in His incarnation or in His theophany as He was spoken of before. We are speaking of angels that are the servants and the ministers of God in behalf of men. And I would have you recognize that it was not the hard thing for God to do this, and for His angel to do it. I find no problem. If you find any problem with this, I suggest you are beginning at the wrong place to solve the problem. The only problem I have ever had with the Bible was the first four words, and when I could swallow those and agree to those, and submit to those, "In the beginning

God...," then I have had no problem with anything else. (Gen. 1:1) Because if you go back there and you agree that this God has been from the beginning, you have no difficulty at all with an angel coming into a locked prison, striking the shackles from the wrists and arms of Peter, releasing him, taking him out of the prison, and setting him free.

The angel of the Lord has thus wrought the deliverance on behalf of Peter that he has desired.

Now let us come to something else. Let's see the results of each principle. The world's first. What is - does this chapter teach us concerning the foundation upon which worldly fellowship rests? What is the consequence of it? Well if you will go with me down to the 23rd verse, you will find the answer. It is always the case. Not always in just this fashion. But the results of these policies which seem so wise and profitable are the same. Hear it? "And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him because he gave not God the glory, and he was eaten of worms and gave up the ghost." We turn to Revelation, Chapter 20, (verses 1-4) and you will find that what was true of Herod at this time becomes true of others later: "And I saw an angel come down from Heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit, and a great chain in His hand, and he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent which is the devil and Satan, and bound him a thousand years, and cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal upon him that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years should be fulfilled; and I saw thrones and they that sat upon them and judgment was given them. And I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the Word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years."

And so we have here the contrast. Worldly policy ends in failure. James has been beheaded, and John his brother said, I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus and the Word of God. And thus even those that have been taken in martyrdom, apparently had failed, apparently their lives had ended in darkness, but now John says, I see them in the presence of the Lord, and I see them with Him. And this after all is the result. The one principle ends in a little prominence, a few possessions, a little well-being for a little while, a little sense of pleasure, and others enjoying ones largesse. But after a while it is the same. The angel of the Lord smites the sinner, because he gave not God the glory, and what was true of Herod is true of all, eaten up with worms, given up their life, and everything worthwhile is lost. And James, seen in the presence of the Lord, in one day to be there to enjoy His glory. What seems to be failure, I say is success. What seems to be darkness is light. What seems to be death is everlasting light.

Now here is the picture of our fellowship. First the church at Antioch heard about the suffering they were going through in Jerusalem. There was going to be persecution. There was going to be famine. And so they had fellowship with believers. They had never seen, they'd never known, and they sent Paul and Barnabas down with offerings. And so who is there in the upper room praying? Who is there through all of these days? Paul and Barnabas. And the church at Antioch is now sharing in all of the suffering through which the church at Jerusalem is passing. This is fellowship. And this is the kind of thing that God is asking of us. And when we hear, for instance, that there is persecution happening out in the Bali as we did at during the Missionary Convention we go immediately to prayer. The cable that carried that word to the Evangelical Alliance Mission in whose field it happened, shared it with us, with all the evangelicals, and immediately people went to prayer as did we. And how grateful we are that that has stopped. God was released to work. And the churches in New York and the churches in the United States, and Australia, and England shared. And so there is a sense in which this that we see here continues until the present.

Then we see another area of fellowship. The only thing that the church at Jerusalem would do was to go on their knees. But they have a common burden now, they have a common grief, and a common heartache, and a common longing. O God, deliver Peter. And all of a sudden, other things seem unimportant. Whether someone is going to have this honor, or this position, this place, this all that seems so unimportant, because they have the Lord. And so they have come to the place of prayer. James beheaded, Peter is brought to the place of deliverance and ministry.

And so it is that if we understand, these are the principles, and this is the fellowship to which we are called, we are prepared to allow the Lord to do His work in us. Let us bow our hearts in prayer.

Now, our Father, we thank and praise Thee that Thou hast given to us the contrast in this chapter, a contrast that is so important, so vital that if we fail to understand it there is going to be confusion, but if we do understand it and realize the

principles to which we are committed, to which we have been called, and upon which we meet, and recognized that this is Thy means of blessing and Thy plan and place of blessing for us, then, Lord, our hearts are at rest. We are not surprised when difficulties come and persecution rises, and we are not surprised, our Father, when we are told that this has happened to our brethren in other places and there is the possibility that it can happen to us here. And so grant that our hearts may rest in peace, in joy, and that we may begin to experience the kind of fellowship now with each other that we are going to wish we had known if these things do come to pass where we are. And above all, our Father, may our fellowship be with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ, but might it be that as we walk in the world tomorrow, and all of us must face the world with its principles and policies, grant that all we are committed to in the Lord Jesus Christ shall be so sweetly manifest and clearly shown, and so honestly lived out by us that those who see us will take note that we have been with Jesus and that we belong to the Lord Jesus Christ. Seal to our hearts thus Thy Word. We plead again the precious Blood of Christ, we stand against the defeated foe and everything he could do to rob the Lord Jesus of the glory that is His right. And so to that end we give Thee praise in His worthy Name. Amen.

Let us stand for the Benediction. Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be and abide with us now and until Jesus comes again. Amen.

* Reference such as: Delivered at The Gospel Tabernacle, New York City on Sunday Evening, December 9, 1962 by Paris W. Reidhead, Pastor.

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