

EKKLESIA 3-A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF ACTS
ACTS 3:1-6, 4:1-12
AUGUST 26, 2018

In 1975, Anthony Flew wrote a book called *Thinking about Thinking*. In this book about epistemology, he highlights a unique problem in the human condition. His idea is titled “No true Scotsman.” In this little anecdote, a Scotsman is reading the newspaper, and he reads about a heinous crime committed in another country, and he says, “No Scotsman would ever do that.” The next day he is reading the paper, and he reads about the same crime being committed in Scotland, and he famously says, “No true Scotsman would ever do that.”

The no true Scotsman concept highlights a very strange condition that confronts humans from all tribes. We make large scale assumptions about a group we belong to and say no one from our group would ever do or say X. When we come across someone in our group who does or says X, we say, “No true member of our group would ever do that.” The true Scotsman line of thinking can be quite dangerous because it allows us to project our preferences and convictions on an entire group, and if someone in the group does not comport with our preferences and convictions, we dub them not a true member.

Do you see any of this going on in the world today? It happens all over the place. All Americans should support the war effort. Someone says I don’t support the war effort, then you aren’t a true American. Someone says all women should be pro-choice, and you state you are pro-life, then they reply you are not a true woman. Or maybe I say all football fans should be Cowboys fans, and you state your love for the 49ers, then I tell you that you aren’t a true football fan. Do you see how that works?

The church in America is having a bit of a true Scotsman moment. True Christians wouldn’t be in favor of this. True Christians wouldn’t vote this way. True Christians would give their money to this. It is a dismissive and divisive disaster that is fracturing the church. Much of

this true Scotsman business comes down to people's understanding of ministering to body or soul.

Often times, people have quite divergent views about what followers of Jesus should be doing, sharing the gospel or showing the gospel. Saving people or healing people. On one hand, people read that Jesus came to seek and save the lost. The Greek word for "save" is *sozo*. On the other hand, people read where Jesus says to love the least of these and how he spent a great deal of time healing those who were sick, hurting and broken. From the sharing the gospel camps, this is especially pertinent in recent years, as many churches have sought to serve their communities and bless people around the world. Some people are concerned because it seems like the church is devolving into a social services program or a glorified non-government organization and no one is getting saved. From the showing the gospel perspective, this is especially pertinent as more and more mega churches spend millions on themselves and their buildings and the entirety of their faith is found during a one-hour service on Sunday morning and no one is being healed.

This is actually not a new situation. If you imagine this conversation as a pendulum with sharing the gospel on one end and showing the gospel on the other end, it has been swinging back and forth for years. While I know there were many movements happening simultaneously in America, let me tell you some of the broad strokes of this movement and pendulum swing in America. In the early 18th century, there was a brand of Christianity that sought to show the gospel by bettering the lives of others and was deeply connected to the public life. In the late 18th century and early 19th century, the Great Awakenings happened in America where the emphasis swung towards preaching the gospel so people were saved by a personal faith in Jesus Christ. In the early 20th century, a man named Walter Rauschenbusch popularized an idea called the social gospel and the pendulum swung again towards showing the gospel by ending injustice and healing the masses. In the middle of the 20th century, the pendulum swung again as the evangelical movement sprung forth through the work of Billy Graham and Bible-based churches that focused mainly on saving souls. In the late 20th century again the pendulum swung both directions as liberation theology became popular and then the emergence of fundamentalism that was

focused on correcting theology that they believed had been skewed. Back and forth. Back and forth. This pendulum has been swinging since the beginning of the church. What is the church's primary purpose? Showing the gospel or sharing the gospel? Saving people or healing people? This is an important question to ask because people on both sides are saying, "No true Christian would..." and in the meantime, we are shrinking our numbers and becoming more and more isolated.

Acts 3:1-10

In this story, Peter and John don't start with sharing the gospel. They start with showing the gospel. "Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have, I give to you...." at this moment. You might think they would say, "Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have, I give to you. Jesus came to die for your sins, and he rose again on the third day." They didn't save this man, instead they healed this man.

I want to give you a bit of context on this passage before we move forward. Peter and John are heading to a daily prayer time at the temple. They are not going for the time of sacrifice because they know Jesus was the sacrifice they needed, but they are still going for prayer time at 3:00 pm. There were actually three prayer times per day, 9:00 am, noon and 3:00 pm. This lame man is sitting by the beautiful gate right by the temple. The beautiful gate was a massive structure as much as 75 feet tall. It was overlaid in precious metals and gems. It had two massive wooden doors. You can only imagine the beauty of this beautiful gate, and its massive size was meant to draw attention upwards to the creator of all beauty. But this man's life has been anything but beautiful. As a lame person in this culture, you were not facing a life of inconvenience, more work and some neglect because of your loss of mobility. You were facing a lifetime at the bottom of the culture. You would be unlikely to work because of your handicap. Because you were unlikely to work, you would most likely never marry and have children, which was very important in this culture. If you were later in life as this man was (by first century standards), your parents had probably passed away and you were completely alone in the world. So you would spend your days dragging yourself or being humiliatingly carried through the dusty streets of Jerusalem in order to

beg for money and continue your solitary existence. On top of all of this, people with disabilities and handicaps were perceived by some Jews to have sinned or their parents had sinned, and their handicap was God's punishment. When you put all of this together, this man sitting by the beautiful gate has had a life that had been anything but beautiful.

You can imagine this man sitting there every day and asking for money from religious people who were on their way to prayer. You wonder if this lame man prayed at all anymore. He probably prayed countless times in his life for healing. If not for healing, then at least for some money so he wouldn't have to beg. If not money, at least a friend so he wouldn't have to go through this miserable life alone. This man, by the beautiful gate, probably watched as beautiful people with beautiful lives passed by and his only hope each day was the condescension that comes when a few coins are tossed your way because of how pathetic you might look. While we don't know for sure, I am guessing this man, now 40 years into this ugly life, had resigned himself to his fate. He no longer asked for healing. He no longer sought out hope. He just asked for money as he did to Peter and John this day.

Here is what I want you to see. Peter and John were filled with the Holy Spirit, and they gave this man exactly what he needed. They healed him, and he got up, followed them and praised God. The gospel is often bifurcated between sharing the gospel and showing the gospel or saving versus healing. I want you to see a more robust version of the gospel where these two ideas are inextricably linked. Showing and sharing. Saving and healing. There is no either or. Sometimes you lead with one. Sometimes you lead with the other. God accomplishes his task through both. For this lame man, he had probably had thousands of religious people tell him that a beautiful God loved him. He probably had more than a few beautiful sermons preached to him about the love of God. But on this day, he needed to experience the beauty of the gospel. What comes next happens naturally. He follows them and praises God. The not so subtle implication is that he became a follower.

Different people need different entry points to the kingdom. Sometimes they need to feel the gospel. Tangibly. Lovingly. They need to be healed before they can be saved. Sometimes

they need to hear the gospel. They need to be saved far more than they need to be healed. We see this in what happens next.

Acts 3:11-16

In this moment, Peter knows these people need to be saved. He needs to share the gospel. There is much to love about this section of scripture. Verse 11 is almost comical. This lame man who has been healed is clinging to Peter and John. This Greek word means to take a strong hold of. You imagine that this man got healed, and he is hanging on these guys and hugging these guys without a care of what they or anyone else think. This man is clinging to them and everybody has heard this ruckus and now they see this man who has spent a lifetime lame as a beggar, now up and dancing, clinging to these two fishermen. Another thing to love about this sermon, it is about as subtle as a punch in the face. There is no soft-peddling here from Peter. This is not an artful, creative or sensitive sermon. Reread 3:13-15.

Peter follows the lead of the Spirit and gives these people exactly what they needed. A swift sermon kick in the pants. Many of these people were religious their entire lives. They went to prayer at 9:00 am, noon and 3:00 pm. They followed the rules, made the right sacrifices and lived beautiful lives. Peter had to confront them. They didn't need to know the beauty of God's mercy. They needed to be shown the ugliness of their sin. They needed the gospel shared with them. Directly. Clearly. They didn't need to be healed. They needed to be saved. Saved from their own self-sufficiency. From their pride. From religion. They needed Jesus preached into their lives. We find out that several thousand people are saved because the number of believers swells from 3,000 to 5,000.

Now then, the outcome was the same in both of these moments. The lame man was healed, he praised God and turned towards him. The spiritually lame religionists were saved and many praised God and turned towards him. The lame man had an ugly life, and he needed to know the beauty of God. The spiritually lame people had beautiful lives, and they need to know the ugliness of their sin. One episode is showing the gospel and a man is healed. One

episode is sharing the gospel and a group is saved, but in both instances, the truth is the same. These people turn to God because of Jesus Christ.

The gospel good news is that lost people will turn to God because of Jesus. The gospel is the message that a loving God has made a way back into his presence through Jesus Christ. Some people need to hear that message so they can receive it. Other people need to feel that message to receive it. We are fully orbed people, and we have a fully orbed gospel. Jesus came to fix what was broken, and he calls his church to do the same. The problem is we sometimes can miss the robust nature of the gospel. That the ultimate point is pointing broken people back to a loving God. Sometimes they need to be healed. Sometimes they need to be saved. Sometimes they need to feel it. Sometimes they need to know it. Let me show you something interesting that happens next.

Acts 4:1-12

It is easy to hear this and miss something interesting that happens here. I told you earlier that the Greek word for save is *sozo*. If you guessed it was in verse 12, you would be correct. There is only one name under heaven given unto men by which we must be *sozo*'ed. Now then, this word actually shows up again in this passage. Can you guess where? Verse 9, how this man was healed. This is the same word, *sozo*. I do not think this is an accident. Between Luke and Acts (same author), Luke uses some version of the word *sozo* 30 times. Sometimes it is about healing. Sometimes it is about saving. Sixteen times it is referring to spiritual healing. Fourteen times it is used for physical healing. Sixteen times it is about sharing the gospel. Fourteen times it is about showing the gospel.

Your ultimate goal is connecting people with God through the resurrected Jesus. When some people you see are doing medical missions without preaching, it cannot be your instinct to say, "No true Christian would do that." When you see a person preaching in Uganda without providing housing for orphans, it cannot be your instinct to say, "No true Christian would do that." *Sozo* shows us we need all of it.

While I believe in discernment and orthodoxy, at the end of the day, it should be quite rare for a true Christian to qualify who is a true Christian. That job is already taken, and it belongs to the Heavenly Father to decide.

I don't know if you remember the drawings of M.C. Escher, but I was looking at them this past week. M.C. Escher popularized the idea of the impossible construction. A concept that bends the mind and doesn't fit well into a practical box. One of the best drawings is *Ascending and Descending*. This impossible construction has people going in different directions on the same staircase. Some people see it one way. Some people see it another way. Here is the interesting part, they are all on the journey on the staircase.

In much the same way, the staircase of the Christian life is for people to know a loving God through the reconciliation of Jesus Christ. Some people hop on because God healed them. Some people jump on because God saved them. Lest we forget, he sozo'ed both of them.

What I am hoping is that we move away from the pendulum and towards course corrections. I think I have had more than a few course corrections in my life. In some moments, it has been all about sharing the gospel and saving. In some moments, it has been all about showing the gospel and healing, then I read the word of God. On my days where I have swung towards only sharing the gospel and saving souls, I receive a course correction when I read about Jesus saying to love the least of these and thus prove you are a disciple. When I read the words of John in his first epistle where he says if you say you love God but do not tangibly care for a brother in need, you are liar and the truth of God is not in you. Or when I read James saying that true religion is about caring for orphans and widows. Conversely, on my days where I have swung towards only showing the gospel and healing bodies, I receive a course correction when I read about Jesus saying, "I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me." Or when I read the words of Paul when he says, "Faith comes by hearing the word of God." Or when I remember that it is by grace we have been saved through faith. These should not be pendulum swings where we go from one extreme to the other, but rather course corrections to remind us of a robust gospel to be held in tension.

Now then, you can read the words of Jesus and see contradiction. Or you can read the words of Paul and the words of James and see contradiction. Or you can see a more robust gospel. One that is focused on leading people to God through Jesus Christ. One that heals what is broken and saves what is lost. Now for some people this is an impossible construction. It is mind-bending. How can it be both? It is cleaner, simpler, easier to make it one or the other. Most divine issues in the Bible are mind-bending. Not easily labeled or simple. Most divine concepts stretch us, as they should. Otherwise they wouldn't be divine. It would be easier to distill the Christian life down to a set of precepts to believe in and principles to be followed. We have a living Messiah leading us by his Holy Spirit and he has said, "Follow me." Sometimes I need you to be a sharer. Sometimes I need you to be a show'er. Sometimes I need you to save. Sometimes I need you to heal, but I always need you to sozo. Follow me. Sometimes I need you to say what I said. Sometimes I need you to do what I did. Follow me.

I'll close with this. The "No true Scotsman" anecdote is nothing new. We face it now. The disciples faced it when they discussed Gentiles and Jesus faced it on a regular basis. No true Messiah would be born into a stable to an unwed mother and father, but he was. No true Messiah would be a carpenter from Nazareth, but he was. No true Messiah would hang out with fisherman, prostitutes and tax collectors, but he did. No true Messiah would wash his followers' feet, but he did. No true Messiah would hang accursed on a cross, but he did. The true Messiah should shock you and stretch you, and when he does, you'll be prone to see more of Jesus in the people around you.