

June 10, 2018

Church Planting  
*American Christianity*  
Acts 22:22-29

**Opening words:** On July 1, I will begin my twenty-fifth year at Western Reserve. I am proud of my longevity and I am proud of the progress we have made as a church. Western Reserve is not the same place that it was in 1994. However, I will admit, I once dreamed of more. I have spent hours trying to identify our problem. The reason for our stunted growth is not geographical. There are many people in the Mahoning Valley who are unchurched and spiritually confused. The reason for our stunted growth is not a lack of human effort. Many hard-working volunteers fill our building weekly to maintain our organization. The reason for our stunted growth is not economic. God has blessed us in many ways. I believe, the reason for our stunted growth is spiritual in nature. In other words, we need a revival! We need to experience the Holy Spirit, firsthand.

American Christian author and preacher, A. W. Tozer (1897-1963) once wrote, "*I remind you that there are churches so completely out of the hands of God that if the Holy Spirit withdrew from them, they wouldn't find it out for many months.*" That quote makes me ask you this series of questions: How long do you think it would take for us to discover the Holy Spirit had withdrawn from Western Reserve? Would the Holy Spirit's exit be an instant discovery? Would the Holy Spirit's exit be a slow erosion? How many would never notice the Holy Spirit was gone? Do you think the Holy Spirit left Western Reserve years ago? Do you think the Holy Spirit was ever here? The Holy Spirit is important, because without the Holy Spirit, this church, any church, has no future.

In 2013, I decided to preach through the book of Acts because Acts is the testimony of the Holy Spirit. I have called this entire body of work *Church Planting*. Originally, I thought I could complete my task in three summers. I was *wrong!* Acts is too important to speed through. Acts tells us clearly, the Holy Spirit created the church originally, and it will be the Holy Spirit who will rebuild the church again. On Labor Day weekend, I hope to complete my task. This is sermon number fifty-five in this series. I have called today's message *American Christianity*. Our scripture reading for today is Acts 22:22-29.

**Acts 22:22-29** The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, "Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!"  
<sup>23</sup> As they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, <sup>24</sup> the commander ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. He directed that he be flogged and interrogated in order to find out why the people were shouting at him like this. <sup>25</sup> As they stretched him out to flog him, Paul said to the centurion standing there, "Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn't even been found guilty?"

<sup>26</sup> When the centurion heard this, he went to the commander and reported it. "What are you going to do?" he asked. "This man is a Roman citizen."

<sup>27</sup> The commander went to Paul and asked, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?"

"Yes, I am," he answered.

<sup>28</sup> Then the commander said, "I had to pay a lot of money for my citizenship."

"But I was born a citizen," Paul replied.

<sup>29</sup> Those who were about to interrogate him withdrew immediately. The commander himself was alarmed when he realized that he had put Paul, a Roman citizen, in chains.

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Robert Kennedy once said, *"Since the days of Greece and Rome, when the word 'citizen' was a title of honor, we have often seen more emphasis put on the rights of citizenship than on its responsibilities."* I have a hard time disagreeing with that quote. It is sad, but true. If you can agree with that quote, say, **"Amen!"**

We find ourselves today in the twenty-second chapter of Acts. So much has happened, I will not even try to summarize it. It will have to suffice to say, Saul has been converted and now is called Paul. It is so late in his story, even his three missionary journeys are complete. The only thing left is his push to Rome.

In our reading for today, Paul is in Jerusalem. During his time away, the Golden City had changed. God had been doing some mighty things among the Jewish population. It is those new Jewish-Christians who gave Paul a hard time. They were reluctant to change. Their old Jewish practices still looked attractive to them. To be more exact, the laws of the Old Testament still looked attractive to them. Paul frustrated them because they believed Paul had dismissed those laws. Tensions ran high and a riot broke out. The Jerusalem Police Department was informed about the disturbance. They put down their donuts and run to the scene of the riot. Barney Fife must have been in charge 😊. Paul is arrested in order to protect him and calm the ugly crowd. However, before he is taken away, the great evangelist requests to speak to the crowd. He gives them his witness, but his words fall on deaf ears. This is where the scripture lesson begins to speak to us.

Once arrested, Paul is taken to the barracks, and the commander orders Paul to be flogged. In those days, and at that time, you were guilty until proven innocent. Seconds before the beating begins, Paul surrenders some information that changed the entire scene. He is a Roman citizen! That doesn't sound shocking to our ears, but it was to the crowd that day. Being a Roman citizen meant something. It meant Paul was excluded from all forms of degrading punishment: beating with rods, scourging, and crucifixion. For this reason and others, Paul's Roman citizenship was valuable. Not everyone was a citizen of the Empire. Citizenship was obtained in the Roman Empire in one of three ways. First, one could perform some outstanding duty to Rome. Second, one could financially buy their citizenship. Third, one could have been born into a family of Roman citizens. Paul's origin of citizenship is unknown, but it doesn't really matter. The only thing that mattered on that day was that Paul was a Roman citizen, excluding him from

the beating. Everyone in today's reading knew that Roman citizenship was valuable. Let me say something you already know. Everyone here today knows American citizenship is valuable too. If you will agree your American citizenship is valuable, say, "**Amen!**" We say it a great deal during this time of the year. America is the land of the free! That is one of the things that makes America unique. That is one of the things that makes America great.

If you do not believe me, then ask the citizens of any of these countries:

- Belarus
- Cambodia
- Cameroon
- Chad
- China
- Cuba
- Egypt
- Ethiopia
- Iran
- North Korea

That list is not complete. According to Planet Rulers, there are 49 dictatorships in the world today. (19 in sub-Saharan Africa, 12 in the Middle East and Northern Africa, 8 in Asia-Pacific, 7 in Eurasia, and 1 in Europe.) The word in those countries is not freedom. The word is autocracy. One of the great blessings you have is being an American citizen. Your American citizenship is valuable. We are the land of the free, and we protect our liberties at all cost. However, this is the question for today: **As an American Christian, what are you doing with your religious freedom?** If that question makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" Let us look at the scripture lesson for today again.

The Apostle Paul is exercising one of his rights as a Roman citizen. He will not be flogged. Instead, he will be set free. As the story continues, we learn Paul did not learn too much from this experience. Paul, the greatest missionary in the history of the church, continues to win souls for Jesus Christ. In other words, he used his freedom to complete God's will for his life. That was predictable. With freedom goes rights, but with freedom comes responsibility. This next line is sad. Many believe, we, as American Christians, have abused our religious freedom. They say, we have substituted God's will for our lives with our own personal agenda. I am not sure "those people" are 100% *wrong*. Let me ask the question again. As an American Christian, what are you doing with your religious freedom?

One of the people who say we have abused our religious freedom is Joseph Mattera. He is the residing Bishop of Resurrection Church in Brooklyn, New York. He says the Biblical church that God intended, and the contemporary American church, are polar-opposites. Consider these statements with me:

**American Christianity focuses on individual destiny. The Bible is more concerned with corporate vision and destiny.**

**American Christianity focuses on individual prosperity. The Bible is more concerned with stewardship.**

**American Christianity focuses on happiness. The Bible is more concerned with humility.**

**American Christianity focuses on stability and comfort. The Bible encourages risk to advance the Kingdom.**

**American Christianity focuses on individual salvation. The Bible addresses individual redemption.**

**American Christianity emphasizes human logic. The Bible focuses on God's power and existence.**

**American Christianity promotes a culture of entertainment. The Bible promotes the pursuit of God.**

**American Christianity is about efficiency. The biblical model is about effectiveness.**

I don't think I like that list, because I found myself and my ways several times. This is an uncomfortable question: Have we used our religious freedom to make Christianity palatable? If that question bothers you, say, **"Amen!"**

In August of 1975, I enrolled at Mount Union College. One of the first classes I took was a religion class, *The Works and Words of Jesus*. It was taught by a man named Bob Mansfield. At eighteen years old, I thought Dr. Mansfield was the most liberal person on the planet. Before I graduated, Dr. Mansfield left Mount Union and took a teaching position at Oral Roberts University. (Maybe he wasn't so liberal, after all?) Looking back, I learned a great deal about Jesus from Dr. Mansfield, because he made us think. His first lecture shook me at my core. He started out by saying that God doesn't change. God is the same today as He was at the creation. He told us God doesn't change, but our understanding of God does change. He believed, we dumb God down, so we can understand and control Him. We dumb God down to make God more comfortable. In the end, we create God in "our own image." All these years later, I must admit it. I believe Bob Mansfield was right! We like to say we are a Biblical church, but maybe we are just a comfortable church. In America we have religious freedom. We have the freedom to dumb God down. But, you know the truth. Just because you can do it, doesn't make it right. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

It was back on May 19, 2018, Prince Harry and Meghan Markle were wed. You may have heard something on the news about it. I can't really believe I am saying this, but I really enjoyed the wedding. Our world is so dark and negative. The wedding was like a breath of fresh air. It was nice to see young people happy and in love. Every detail of the wedding was covered. The part of the story I found intriguing was that Meghan Markle is an American. She is the first American Princess since Wallis Simpson. Her official title is the Duchess of Sussex. I assumed when you married a Prince of England, you were granted automatic British citizenship. I was wrong! She was not granted citizenship, she was only granted permanent residency. There is a difference. Many believe she will renounce her American citizenship and apply for British citizenship to escape American taxes. That leads me to an interesting question. If you were Meghan Markle, would you give up your American citizenship? We have looked at this question in in the past.

Many have given up their American citizenship in the past. Would you give up your American citizenship? I hope your answer is no. Your American citizenship is valuable. America still is the land of the free. The question is not, if we are free. The question is, what will we do with our freedom? As American Christians, are we going to reform the the faith to make us happy and comfortable? Or, as American Christians, are we going to live in a way that is pleasing to God? The choice is ours. In America, we are free to decide. Do you remember the words of Robert Kennedy? He once said, *"Since the days of Greece and Rome, when the word 'citizen' was a title of honor, we have often seen more emphasis put on the rights of citizenship than on its responsibilities."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**