

THE EXPLOSIVE CHURCH

(11) More Wonders in the West.

Acts 18:23-28. We don't know how long Paul stayed at Antioch, but eventually his pastoral concern for the churches he had established, drove him to travel once again through the districts covered in his second missionary journey.

Meantime, Luke gives us one of the loveliest stories in this book of Acts. The Egyptian city of Alexandria, the second most important city in the Roman Empire, had the world's largest expatriate colony of Jews – rich, cultured, turbulent and powerful. They were proud of their heritage, because it was the Jews of Alexandria who, 200 years before Christ, had given the world the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament – thereby giving the whole Greek-speaking world access to the Jewish Scriptures which were the foundation for the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Out of this heritage came one young man to the city of Ephesus – Apollos. Luke tells us he was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. Perhaps through some early believers, he had heard about Jesus, had put his faith in Him, and zealously sought to convince anyone who would listen to him. For some reason, however, he had not heard about the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and knew only that the first step to becoming a disciple of Jesus was to undergo the baptism of repentance that John had taught. There was no error in his teaching – just an incompleteness which prevented him and his followers from enjoying the completed work of the risen Christ and the richness of the Holy Spirit living within them.

In Ephesus Apollos took up again his earnest preaching – unknowingly setting the stage for what could have been a disaster. For in the congregation were two well-seasoned saints, Aquila and Priscilla, who could have been scandalized or at least distressed by the partial truth the young enthusiast was teaching. But this godly couple were filled with the grace of God. There was no private criticism or public condemnation of this newcomer: instead, they quietly invited him to their home and there, gently and tactfully, along with a tasty lunch, they “explained to him the way of God more adequately.” And Apollos humbly learnt from them. It was a good thing he did. For, encouraged by the believers in Ephesus, he then went to preach in Corinth where his fuller understanding completely convinced many Jews and greatly strengthened those who were already believers. Apollos was to become known as perhaps the most effective speaker in early Christendom, but it could have been so different: he and his talents might have been lost for ever in despair and discouragement.

What is your reaction to a speaker with whom you disagree? Do you automatically consider him wrong? Do you point out his faults or relate them to others? Or are you humble enough to consider that he may be right? Sometimes young people make mistakes in their eagerness and lack of experience. Often short on self-confidence, they could so easily be lost to the Kingdom of God through some bigoted know-all! Rather, let's be open to mentoring them with humility ourselves, keeping in mind that all wisdom and knowledge is a gift from God: it should be treasured and shared with graciousness.

Ephesus, new frontier for Paul. Acts 19:1-22.

The city of Ephesus, with a population of 500,000, was the most important city in western Asia Minor, founded to command one of the great highways and trade routes from the east to the sea. As queen among 230 separate communities in that area in Roman times, she issued her own coinage and managed her own affairs. The main central street was 20 metres wide and paved with marble. The city boasted a medical centre, libraries drawing students from all over the world, theatres and a magnificent temple to the Greek goddess Artemis (Diana to the Romans) – one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world. In her position as a link between the east and the west, she presented a focal point for Paul to establish an outreaching church.

It was here that Paul encountered 12 disciples who may have been influenced by Apollos, as their understanding of the Gospel of Jesus was as limited as his had been. Paul soon set their thinking straight and, willingly undergoing baptism into the name of the Lord Jesus, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and gave evidence of this as they spoke in tongues and prophesied.

For 3 months Paul set out the claims of the Kingdom of God in the synagogue, but the Jews, as obstinate here as everywhere else, slandered the Gospel and its bearers until Paul felt it diplomatic to move to the neutral

ground of the lecture hall of Tyrannus. Tyrannus would have used the hall during the morning hours and then vacated it between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. for the purpose of the Asian “siesta.” Paul would have had to hire the hall for the hot hours of the day for his own lectures and it serves to highlight the attraction of the Gospel that for 2 years his discussions drew the siesta-forsaking crowds to hear him! And it appears that the visiting hearers didn’t keep the message to themselves when they returned home: **verse 10 says** “all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.” It is interesting to remember that, on his previous journey, Paul had tried unsuccessfully to go to that region: God had not forgotten them, He just had a different timetable from Paul.

Do you sometimes feel overwhelmed by all the urgent need throughout the world – mainly, of course, to hear the Words of Life? What can one person do? we ask hopelessly. It helps if we get things in the right perspective and remember that the responsibility of the whole world is on God’s shoulders, not ours. Our responsibility is simply to do what we can with what we have: God will ask nothing more from us. Paul champed at the bit many times but at the end of his life he could say, in 2 Timothy 3:7, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” So he confidently awaited the “crown of righteousness” promised to him by the Lord, the righteous Judge – who alone is our Judge too!

Battle and Blessing!

God set His approval on Paul’s ministry by doing extraordinary miracles through him – **verses 11,12** - but of course that stirred up some counterfeit activity among the Jews. There were charlatans around who would claim the power to exorcise evil spirits, including the 7 sons of Sceva, a self-styled priest. These men tried to invoke the name of Jesus to heal, but they were tampering with forces beyond their knowledge, and the punishment for their hypocrisy was to be severely beaten themselves by the evil spirit they had tried to cast out. Jews and Greeks alike living in Ephesus, were filled with fear, which had the good result of them revering the name of the Lord Jesus and forsaking their occult practices. Ephesus was famous for its “Ephesian letters” which were written charms, amulets and talismans, desirable souvenirs for the many travellers who came to worship at the temple and gape at the tourist sites. Belief led to action and many of the new Christians who had once practised sorcery brought their scrolls and other means of making money to feed a giant bonfire in one of the city’s public squares as an expression of their change of heart and new-found freedom. The total value of these, given in **verse 9** as 50,000 drachmas, would today be about half a million dollars. **Verse 20** sums up the happy situation – the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.

Paul was uncompromising in his message: there was no halfway position – it was sorcery or Jesus Christ. Is the Church still uncompromising today, or has it been tainted by the fashion for “political correctness?” The young church at Ephesus was strong: what about the Church worldwide today? Sadly, the penalty for compromise is weakness.

A Yelp from the Hip Pocket! Acts 19:23-41.

One very popular souvenir to be bought in Ephesus was a small silver shrine of the goddess Artemis, easy to transport and handy if one was earnest enough to worship her at home. Supervising their manufacture was the silversmith Demetrius, leader of the silversmiths’ guild. The guilds of workers that flourished in New Testament times were an ongoing problem to the non-conforming Christian: they were social societies rather than trade unions and included guilds for bankers, doctors, architects, producers of woollen and linen goods, dyers, workers in metal, stone or clay, builders, carpenters, pastry cooks, barbers, embalmers and transport workers. These guilds satisfied the need of the people for social intercourse and self-expression, but under adroit leadership they could be used as a sharp political weapon. The Roman administration was naturally sensitive to the trouble they could cause and passed severe laws against any illegal association - which category could easily be applied to a group of Christians even when they caused no trouble of any kind.

Calling together his fellow-silversmiths and workers in related trades, Demetrius bluntly warned them of the fall-off in trade as more and more believers forsook their idol worship. According to him, Paul had “led astray” large numbers of people in “practically the whole province of Asia.” In order not to sound too mercenary, he added the more noble complaint that their trade would lose its good name, the temple of Artemis would be discredited and the goddess robbed of her divine majesty. His cunning worked and the workers were whipped up into a fury, with the uproar soon spreading to the whole city. They naturally gravitated to the theatre –which could seat 25,000 people - but then, true to form, the crowd degenerated

into confusion, with senseless shouting and the cynical comment of Luke in **verse 32** that “most of the people did not even know why they were there.”

After 2 hours of the crowd’s mindless behaviour the city clerk - the most important local official and the executive officer of the civic assembly – managed to quell the uproar with the admonishment that their rioting was likely to bring serious charges down on their collective heads. It is important that he happened to include a dismissal of anything illegal on the part of the Christians who had “neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess.” (**Verse 37.**) It is also interesting that he continued, “the courts are open and there are *proconsuls*.” Critics once said that there was only ever *one proconsul at a time*, and so Luke had made a mistake in using the plural. Then the discovery was made that, for some reason, there were indeed 2 proconsuls in Ephesus at that particular time: once again, Luke was right!

It was significant that the Christians weathered this storm without any blame attaching to themselves. It is tempting to degenerate into a defensive attitude when we are attacked for our faith. How can we maintain a good witness even when unfairly accused? The encouragement of 1 Peter 2:21-24 should help“Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example ... he did not retaliate ... Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly....He himself bore our sins So that we might die to sins and live for righteousness.”

Setting off for Home. Acts 20:1-38.

It was a case of *déjà vu*. Once the uproar had subsided Paul felt it politically sensible to leave. But he was certainly not creeping off with his tail between his legs: he *encouraged* the Ephesian disciples before setting off for Macedonia, and as he travelled west he continued this encouragement to whomever he met, until at last he arrived back in Corinth. He stayed there for 3 months and it seems it was for him a time of calm and renewing. For it was in those 3 months that he wrote that masterpiece of theology, his letter to the Romans.

Alas, the respite was brief. Before Paul could set sail for Syria the ubiquitous Jews made a plot against him and, realising it would have been easy to do away with him among a shipload of hostile Jews, Paul changed his plans and went overland through Macedonia. Seven believers went with him in support, and it is interesting to note the districts from which they had come – Berea, Thessalonica, Derbe and Asia. The Church was indeed spreading and becoming multinational! Back at Philippi they were joined by Luke (**verse 6**) and eventually they all ended up in Troas for a week.

Verse 7 indicates that by this time it was the custom for Christians to meet on the first day of the week, the day of the resurrection of the Lord, rather than on the Sabbath, the last day. The change was significant: under the Law, Israel worked towards the day of rest and the blessing of God: under grace, we start with the blessing of the Lord, and His rest, then work for Him because of it.

People who get sleepy in church should take note here that Paul, mindful of his departure next day, kept on talking until midnight! With a sense of urgency he tried to impart as much teaching as he could to these believers still young in the faith. With the heat of the lamps and the lateness of the hour, it is little wonder that the young man Eutychus, sitting in the window to get a breath of fresh air, should fall asleep. It is surprising that there was no one near him with the care and concern to watch him even while they were wrapt in Paul’s message. Can you imagine Paul’s feelings of horror as he raced downstairs to the lifeless Eutychus? But with masterful understatement Luke tells us Paul threw his own body onto the young man, who came back to life – (this miracle being attested to by a doctor!) whereupon Paul calmly went back up the stairs, had a communion service and went on talking till daylight!

What is our attitude to the young people in our churches? Do they offend us with their modern ways and irreverent dress? Give thanks to God that they are at least there, rather than getting into trouble somewhere else. What they need is our sincere concern, interest and godly love, making it conducive for them to listen to us when we need to teach them about God. We will always need teaching, ourselves!

We wonder why Paul decided to go overland again while the rest of his party sailed south from Troas. Did he need more time alone, to pray, to think, to consecrate himself once again to the mission God had given him? He was determined to personally take the gifts of the Gentile Christians to Jerusalem, doubtless in an attempt to bind together in the bonds of love the two parts of the Church – Jew and Gentile. He had already had premonitions of danger ahead, but like his Lord, he set his face towards his own personal calvary. **Verses 22,23.)** He rejoined the ship at Assos and they continued sailing south to Miletus.

But Paul was still in a hurry and, instead of visiting the nearby Ephesus, he called for the church elders to come to him for their last-minute instructions. His farewell speech to them is intensely personal, quoted verbatim by Luke, as if this great man of God needed to reveal that he was also a man of flesh and needed understanding and support. We learn more about his ministry at Ephesus from this long speech: he had not only preached, but visited from house to house in care and concern (**verse 20**): he had worked with his own hands to support himself financially – maybe with Aquila and Priscilla again (**verse 34**): he had served as the master shepherd over the flock which he now urged the elders to oversee like shepherds themselves. And now, with insight and foresight, he was able to leave the church efficiently organized to meet the demands of growth and the problems that were still to arise. It was a tearful farewell as they knelt on the seafront beside the ship and commended each other to the grace of God.

It is right that we respect and honour our leaders, who are serving God for the sake of His Church. But let's never forget that they are human too: rather than wounding with criticism, we should strengthen them with encouragement and genuine love in the bonds of Christ. Think of creative ways in which we can all do this.

And so to Jerusalem. Acts 21:1-20.

“After we had torn ourselves away from them”, Luke says poignantly in **verse 1**, they sailed across the Mediterranean to Syria and landed at Tyre where they spent a welcome 7 days with the local disciples. But through the Holy Spirit these believers had another warning for Paul that he should not proceed to Jerusalem. Their words fell on deaf ears and the party continued sailing on to Caesarea, where they stayed with Philip the evangelist (the one who started out as a “deacon” over 20 years before.) The next verse should be framed and hung on the wall for anyone who rejects the ministry of women in the church. Philip’s 4 grown-up daughters all “prophesied” - in other words, they *preached*!

After their stay of several days, the prophet Agabus came from Judea with a further dramatic warning for Paul, claiming the authority of the Holy Spirit to tell him that he would face prison and worse in Jerusalem.

(Verses 10-11.) At this all his companions, including Luke, united in a plea that Paul listen to the voice of reason but all in vain. Nothing would dissuade Paul from his purpose, convinced as he was beyond doubt that this was the way God was leading him, even if it meant his death. We can hear the frustration and despair of his companions as they “gave up and said, ‘The Lord’s will be done.’” (**verses 12-14**) It is perhaps significant that, within about 2 years, Paul would pen these words to the church in Philippi while under house arrest in Rome – “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.”

(Philippians 3:10,11).

Was Paul right in persisting in his course against repeated warnings from other godly people? It is hard to question the honest convictions of such a spiritual giant. Yet even the greatest men are not beyond the possibility of error, and the Bible always honestly reports such incidents. Looking ahead we will see that Paul’s decision cost him many years of fruitful ministry in the prime of his life as he languished in gaol, although such time spent in inactivity allowed him to write his many epistles. We shall never know the answer till we ask him ourselves in Heaven! In the meantime, let’s once again consider the tremendous problems that beset our church leaders in seeking the mind and will of God, especially when two paths seem equally right. They need our prayers, our love, our understanding – and our forgiveness if they make a mistake!

From **verses 15-20** we see that the companionship afforded to Paul along his whole journey, continued until his warm welcome at his destination, Jerusalem, with the monetary gift from the far-flung Gentiles no doubt burning a hole in his robe until he could hand it over in triumph to the hierarchy! And this great scholar, theologian, missionary, strategist, pastor and teacher, made himself accountable by presenting himself to James, Jesus’ brother and the leader of the Jerusalem church, in order to report on this his third missionary journey. What more could the stalwarts of the mother church say, than simply to praise God!

