

THE EXPLOSIVE CHURCH

(10) The Wild and Wonderful West.

Acts 17:1-9. After the experience in Philippi, Paul seemed to accept that God wanted him to continue his ministry in what is now Europe and so he, Silas and Timothy travelled westward along the famous Egnatian Way the 150 or so kilometres to Thessalonica. Luke resorts to “they” instead of “we” now, so maybe he stayed behind in his beloved Philippi. Thessalonica, a wealthy and influential city of more than 200,000 people, was the capital of Macedonia, with a synagogue and a colony of Jews, and therefore a strategic place for Paul to establish a church. Paul indeed wasted no time in preaching Christ in the synagogue on 3 consecutive Sabbaths – “from the Scriptures” (verse 2) which of course meant the Old Testament. For any Jew willing to search those Scriptures with an open mind, they would find ample proof that the Jesus Paul preached was indeed the One foretold throughout the Old Testament. The response was similar to that of other centres – “some” Jews and “a large number” of God-fearing Greeks, as well as several prominent women, accepted Paul’s word and became believers in Christ. Gentiles outnumbered Jews once again! It is also interesting to note that, as before, the first converts were those of intellectual ability: it was the unthinking rabble that could not accept the gospel. Faith is never against reason: the truth about Jesus makes sense.

What is your response when someone says to you, “I can’t believe that rubbish!”? It is easy to become defensive, but is there any point in trying to win the argument? What – or Who – is the only factor that will convince an agnostic? What did Philip say to the sceptical Nathanael in John 1:46?..... “Come and see.”

Then came another familiar response – “the Jews were jealous!” It seems the idea of “rent-a-crowd” is not new: these Jews rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot. Reason was by now completely left out of the proceedings as Jason (probably the visitors’ host) and other innocent victims were dragged before the city officials under the charge of “causing trouble all over the world.” (I rather like the Authorised Version of that verse 6 – “These that have turned the world upside down”. Jesus has a habit of turning our world upside down when we follow Him!) The accusers went right off the track, trying to pin a charge of treason against the believers, resulting in turmoil throughout the city. The hapless Jason was forced to guarantee a peaceful, quiet community under threat of confiscation of his property, or even death.

Under such duress Jason and the local believers made haste to send Paul and Silas away, but from Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians we can deduce there was probably a time lapse between verses 4 and 5, and that the evangelists may have stayed in the city for several months. Paul had obviously taught the young church much more doctrine than could have been imparted in 3 weeks. It is probable that Jason had to ensure that Paul would never return to the city, as Paul talks in **1Thessalonians 2:17,18** of being “torn away from youwe wanted to come to you but Satan stopped us.” If that is so, the young church would have been left in the care of new believers such as Jason and we can see that it is by the grace of God that the church became a strong centre for evangelism in the midst of continuing persecution

An interesting sideline here. In verse 6 the Greek word that Luke used for “city officials” is “politarch”, meaning “city ruler”. This word is found nowhere else in Greek literature and it was presumed to show Luke’s ignorance. However, in 1835 the word was discovered in a Greek inscription on an arch that had spanned the Egnatian Way near Thessalonica (this is now in the British Museum) and a further 16 such inscriptions were subsequently found. So Luke was right!

Let’s have a look at Jason. As a believer, it seems he offered hospitality to Paul and Silas as a ministry to God, but it was one which ended in disastrous and costly circumstances! Loss of dignity, loss of public honour, maybe physical injury, loss of money and the threat of death hanging over his head – not to mention the loss of the person who had told him about Jesus and shown him the way of salvation! How would we have coped with that, as new Christians? Believers of many years’ standing sometimes go to pieces when the pastor they depended on has been taken away. Yet the church at Thessalonica thrived and developed, Jason no doubt being one of their leaders. He had the courage to stay where he was and to do what he could in the face of opposition. We don’t hear of him again: he was the man for the moment and the man for the following years. He surely is in the honour roll of God!

Bright and Brainy Bereans. Acts 17:10-15.

Under cover of darkness Paul and his friends were spirited away west about 60 kilometres to Berea – today's Verria with a population of 15,000. Here again there was a synagogue and a colony of Jews and Paul of course went full tilt at his usual practice of bringing the gospel tidings to the gathering of Jews and God-fearers in the synagogue. Verse 11 and 12 are so heartening in this story! The Bereans, more noble than the Thessalonians, were not gullible, but they were open-minded, and diligently searched the Old Testament Scriptures to check the veracity of Paul's message. Once convinced, they whole-heartedly believed – "many of the Jews, a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men." What balm that must have been for Paul! Alas, it was short-lived. Unbelieving Jews in Thessalonica, not content with having got rid of Paul from their own city, brought trouble with them to Berea and, like a hot potato Paul was shunted off to the coast.

Verse 14 tells us Silas and Timothy, not so endangered as the leader Paul, were left behind in Berea, no doubt with the mission of educating the believers further and deepening their faith. Paul throughout his letters talks with affection of his loyal and invaluable helpers. We can't all be evangelists, preachers, trail-blazers, but we can all use the gifts God has given us to nurture His Church. Here is the challenge – how much are we doing to assist our pastors and build up the church where we ourselves have been nourished?

Athens, city of the gods. Acts 17:16-33.

With care and compassion some of the Berean believers escorted Paul to Athens where he could have some respite while waiting for Silas and Timothy to catch him up. And what a tourist's highlight was this city! Athens then was in the late afternoon of its glory. It had been the foremost Greek city-state since the 5th century B.C. and even after its incorporation into the Roman Empire it retained a proud intellectual independence. Athens had produced Thucydides, perhaps the finest of all historians: giants of literature such as Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides: philosophers such as Socrates, Aristotle and Plato, the greatest thinkers and greatest writers of the ancient world. Athens was the first city to have democracy, and maintained a leading university in Paul's day. And of course there was the unrivalled architecture, the frescoes, the Parthenon and the statue of Athena whose gleaming spear-point could be seen almost 50 kilometres away!

But for Paul the monuments to past greatness did not enrapture him. Rather, his spirit was moved to depths of anger and sorrow as he saw the gross idolatry on every hand. An old Greek philosopher had written some time before Paul, "In Athens it is easier to find a god than a man." Images were everywhere of gods worshipped not only by Greeks, but also by Asiatics, Egyptians, Romans and other far-flung nations. Statues of Apollo, Jupiter, Venus, Mercury, Bacchus, Neptune and Diana were of stone and brass, gold, silver, ivory and marble. Almost every false deity worshipped on earth could be found represented in Athens, even though, ironically, this was the educational centre of the world and some teachers of philosophy lectured on the folly of idolatry!

Paul, being Paul, could not sit down under this provocation to his soul. True to his custom he began to reason in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, then moved on naturally to adopt the practice of Socrates, that of free discussion in the market-place. We see here how God had prepared this giant of an evangelist by giving him a monumental intellect, honed by university training, so that he had developed the versatility to mix confidently with this sophisticated society as an equal.

The 3rd century B.C. had seen the rise of the systems of the Epicureans and the Stoics, both philosophies of breakdown and despair. Put very simply, the Epicureans emphasized chance, escape and the enjoyment of pleasure, while the Stoics emphasized fatalism, submission and the endurance of pain. Paul countered both philosophies with the Gospel – the caring activity of a personal Creator, the dignity of human beings as His offspring, the certainty of judgement and the call to repentance – with the natural climax, as told in **verse 18**, of the "good news about Jesus and the resurrection." The word "babblers" means "seed picker", as a bird picking up seeds here and there: it came to mean pseudo-teachers who picked up whatever scraps of learning they could find, and parading them without having digested them for themselves. By Paul's time the questing spirit of the great Athens had degenerated into mere curiosity, and the search for truth had sickened into cynicism.

This great quest for knowledge goes on today. Forums, seminars, debates, discussion groups, and many proposing to introduce new philosophies of their own. Is there anything wrong in the search for knowledge? Should we as Christians seek to be part of such movements, willing to put forward what we have experienced of the grace and love of God?

Verse 19 brings an exciting development. The august Senate of the Areopagus, the Council whose members were guardians of the city's religion, morals and education, were curious to know about this "new god" of whom Paul was preaching, and quite courteously asked him to appear before them, not as a trial in the judicial sense, but simply to defend for himself this new religion he was seeking to introduce. And thus Paul was given the pivotal opportunity of bringing to a meeting point for the first time, the ancient Greek philosophy and the new and vibrant Christian message. Notice the slight difference in this sermon: whereas when speaking to Jews he would logically begin with the ancient scriptures familiar to them, here Paul starts from the standpoint of his audience, that of their worship of many gods, leading them to a revelation of the "unknown God" and His love for humankind as demonstrated in Jesus' death and resurrection.

Sadly, whereas the Bereans were prepared to use their brains to work out the veracity of the Gospel, here these philosophers were far too "intellectual" to accept the simple truth. Someone rose from the dead? Whoever heard of such a thing! We can't accept that nonsense! Some sneered openly while others demurred politely rather than take a decisive stand. Paul had reached a deadlock. In frustration he left the Council. There were some converts, but not many. It is so much harder to evangelize people who are totally ignorant of God, and sadly this is happening in our own land today, where children no longer have any sub-culture of the basic Bible stories on which their faith in Jesus might be built.

In Matthew 18:3 Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." What did he mean? What are little children like – gullible, ignorant, self-centred? Yes, but trusting, open-minded, humble, teachable. Are we prepared to become little children before our Father, accepting His greater wisdom and discipline along with His mercy and forgiveness? Jesus said this to his disciples as they were jockeying for positions of importance in the kingdom of heaven. There is only one door into heaven: it is low and one has to go through it on one's knees!

Corinthian Pillars.

Acts 18:1-11. So it was probably with a heavy heart that Paul left Athens, making his way southwest to the Achaian city of Corinth. It has been estimated that in Paul's day Corinth had a population of 250,000, plus perhaps 400,000 slaves. In many ways it was the chief city of Roman Greece. Sitting on a highway of trade, traversed by Roman legions and agents of trade and commerce, it had become a byword for open and unbridled immorality. Aphrodite had her temple there, served by no less than 1,000 sacred prostitutes. The city was so notorious for its debauchery and loose living that the Greek verb "to Corinthianize" came to mean "to practice sexual immorality."

Little wonder that Paul said in his letter to them some time later, **(1 Corinthians 2:3)** "I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling." He may have had another bout of malaria to exacerbate his discouragement over Athens. Perhaps he was unsure of God's programme for him at the time.

But God, as ever, had His hand on Paul. For in Corinth he met a couple who were to become his stalwart friends and loyal partners in ministry. Roman Emperor Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome, probably about A.D.49, "because of their continual tumults instigated by Chrestus" (a common misspelling of "Christ." Through this biased misunderstanding, two Godly people were forced to pack up and leave their home, and they happened to travel to Corinth. Priscilla, often named first of the two, which could indicate she was a woman of some importance and/or wealth, and her husband Aquila, were tentmakers. All Jewish boys, no matter how wealthy or socially high-ranking, were taught a trade they could use in case of necessity, and for Paul, this had been tentmaking. Of like minds and like occupations, these 3 formed a partnership, providing Paul with finance and accommodation as well as the balm of spiritual fellowship. As was natural for Paul, he reasoned every Sabbath in the synagogue, trying to persuade both Jews and Greeks. Then when Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, bearing a monetary gift from the churches there, Paul could afford to spend his whole time preaching.

In the happy fusion of Paul, Aquila and Priscilla, God was working in all 3 lives. Have you seen that in your own life and the lives of friends around you, how God can bring people together and blend them skilfully for the glory of His Kingdom? A Godly married couple is a mighty witness to God's love, and perhaps a group of like-minded folk will form a strong and enduring alliance for His cause. God is the master-planner when it comes to personnel!

Trouble rears its ugly head! It had to happen, of course. In **verse 6** the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, evoking his reaction of clearing himself of all responsibility towards them. This meant he had to stop lecturing in the synagogue, but not before the ruler, Crispus, and his household, had become believers in Jesus. Looking ahead we can see this was a good provision for the young church to have someone of responsibility and standing among the first converts. Right next to the synagogue was the house of another believer, Titius Justus, who welcomed the speaker and his hearers, and so the mission was able to continue. Paul no doubt felt the setback strongly, and so the Lord came to his aid with a special vision one night, (**verses 9-11**) encouraging him not to be afraid, but to keep on preaching, that he would come to no harm, for "I have many people in this city." Already! Emboldened, Paul stayed for a year and a half, imparting to these raw new Christians the treasures of the Scriptures.

We may wonder why Luke included the incident in **verses 12-17**, but in fact it has important implications. Gallio was an unusual magistrate, a Stoic, the brother of the philosopher Seneca (Nero's tutor) and admired as a man of exceptional fairness and calmness. Whereas Judaism was recognised as a religion throughout the Roman world, Christianity was not, and could be labelled illegal and thus seriously endangered. From his position of authority Gallio, by forbearing to blame or prosecute the Christians, was in fact giving legality to Christianity, and this would influence minor authorities in the whole of the Aegean area.

Most of the converts in Corinth had come straight from paganism, with only a small proportion of well-taught and disciplined converts from the synagogue, which accounts for a certain instability in the church, evident to us as we read Paul's letters to them. But considering the environment, it was a miracle there sprung up a church at all! In fact, the establishing of this church has gone down in history as one of Paul's greatest achievements. It has been described as a "flower blooming on a dunghheap."

How much do we blame our environment for our behaviour? "Clean up the slums and the people will reform!" But do they? Only the Holy Spirit living within us can change our lives, as Paul told them in 2 Corinthians 5:17 – "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation." He alone can change our lives – and He can make them beautiful, irrespective of our circumstances!

It seems that Paul felt it was time to report back to the church in Antioch (**verses 18-22.**) Before he went, however, as Luke mentions in **verse 18**, Paul had his hair cut off because of a vow he had taken. This was probably a temporary Nazirite vow, maybe as thanksgiving for deliverance from all the grave dangers he had faced. The hair would most likely be burnt at Jerusalem as a sacrifice. Liberated as he was from the attempt to be justified by the law, Paul also had the liberty to conform to ceremonial or cultural practices, perhaps in this case as a gesture to the Jewish Christian leaders in Jerusalem.

Taking Aquila and Priscilla with him, he made a quick visit to Ephesus and left them there, where they did a faithful job of proclaiming the Gospel so that the ground was prepared for Paul's visit some time later. Once again, God's timing was perfect. Paul had more to learn before he could lead this church and through his subsequent teaching Ephesus became one of the strongest churches, so that through them the Gospel spread throughout all Asia. Meanwhile Paul sailed on for Syria and, still bowing to the authority of the mother church in Jerusalem, paid them a visit to make his report before returning to his beloved "home base" of Antioch, doubtless to thrill the congregation with the tales of his latest exploits in his ministry for God.

