

Strategic Bases

Acts 16:6–19:41, 1 and 2 Thessalonians

Macedonia

Paul's mission strategy was a combination of shrewd planning and careful listening to the Holy Spirit. For some weeks Paul, Silas, and Timothy plodded uncertainly across Asia Minor as the Spirit kept saying, "Not here" and "Not that way." Well, which way do You want us to go then? At last, word came in a vision: Macedonia.

So they sailed for the rugged land north of Greece and a few days later found themselves in the Roman colony of Philippi. (See map, page 344.) "Roman colony" meant that the town was wall-to-wall Italian war veterans thoroughly bigoted against Jews. There wasn't even a synagogue in town, only a spot outside the gates where a few women gathered to pray.

That was good enough for Paul. He found the prayer spot, and it wasn't long before one of the gathering, a wealthy businesswoman named Lydia, believed the message and invited the team to stay in her home. Her entire extensive household followed her lead. Overnight Philippi had a Christian community.

The biblical account of how the gospel spread from Jerusalem to Rome is called The Acts of the Apostles. It is the second

of a two-volume history by a doctor named Luke. (The Gospel of Luke is his first volume; it recounts the work of God from just before Jesus' birth to His resurrection. The Acts picks up the story at that point.)

Luke focused on Paul's work because he was a colleague and sometime companion of Paul. He may have been from Antioch, or perhaps the seaport of Troas, or even Philippi. At any rate, at the point where he describes the sea voyage from Troas to Macedonia, Luke begins to speak of "we" instead of "they." He was an eyewitness to the events at Philippi as well as later events in his book, and it was probably through watching Paul that Luke came to appreciate how the Holy Spirit operated.

In fact, Acts could equally be called "The Acts of the Holy Spirit." Luke's first volume described how Jesus fulfilled His mission to proclaim good news to the poor and freedom for the captives; his second recounted how the Holy Spirit picked up that job after Jesus' departure and fulfilled it through ordinary people.

But could Paul really be called ordinary? When he was in Philippi, a lynch mob, an arrest on a charge of anti-Roman proselytizing, a merciless flogging, and a miraculous escape from prison were all in a day's work. Hounded out of that town, the team hiked another hundred miles to Thessalonica, the capital of Macedonia, where another mob attacked them after a mere three weeks. (See map, page 344.) The seedling community smuggled the team fifty miles away, but some Thessalonian Jews pursued them until Paul had to flee Macedonia entirely.

Greece

Paul sailed south to Athens while Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea to solidify the work there as best they could. To pass the time, Paul talked about Christ with anybody who would listen, but made little headway. Beautiful Athens held a mystique won five centuries earlier by a generation of brilliant poets, artists, philosophers, and statesmen. But now Athens's laurels were faded: the best philosophy students sought other universities; the best artists worked elsewhere. Yet second-rate scholars abounded, and what they lacked in creative thinking they more than made up for in pride. They could tell in a minute that Paul lacked the genteel

accents of a cultured gentleman, and that his doctrines were backwater notions far from the fashionable views of educated men. On the whole, they were much less concerned with whether his ideas were true than with whether they were "in."

Silas and Timothy arrived eventually, but Paul was more concerned about the Macedonian newborns than with Athenian snobs. It was a lot to expect of people who had known Christ for bare weeks to withstand contempt and even outright violence from their neighbors. Paul grieved to think his seedlings might have collapsed under pressure. So he immediately dispatched Timothy to check on the Thessalonian community and Silas to visit Philippi. He himself set off down the Greek peninsula to Corinth. (See map, page 344.)

Corinth was Greece's political and economic hub, as it commanded both the land route through Greece and the sea route from Italy to anywhere east. Its population of some 250,000 free persons plus 400,000 slaves included every nationality in the known world crowded into a few bustling square miles. The temple of Aphrodite attracted tourists and sailors to its sacred prostitutes, who catered to any taste. In fact, the general tenor of the town prompted a Greek slang term: to "Corinthianize" meant "to practice sexual immorality."

Paul was overjoyed to meet some Jewish believers in Corinth. Priscilla and Aquila had left Rome a year or so earlier when Emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from that city because of riots instigated by someone named "Chrestus." At least, that was the way the Romans saw it. It's not unlikely that Jewish followers of Christ had reached Rome and caused the same tumult Stephen had raised in Jerusalem and Paul in nearly every city he visited. But the Romans could make nothing of this Jewish dispute; all they cared about was public order.

At any rate, here in Corinth were a couple of seasoned troops for Paul to ally with. Amazingly, they were leatherworkers just as he was—a perfect match. For a while the new team supported themselves making tents and other leather goods. Their business was an ideal forum for exposing customers and neighbors to Christ, and they could spend their Sabbaths discussing Jesus in the synagogue.

Letters to Thessalonica

Eventually, Silas and Timothy returned from Macedonia with good news and money. The good news was that both Thessalonica and Philippi were standing firm against bitter hostility. The money came from Philippi; the Philippian community wanted to be full partners with Paul in the work of spreading the gospel. They knew their main task was to attract their neighbors to Christ by the way they lived. Paul carried the message across cultural and geographical lines, converted whoever was ready to respond, and moved on; then the local group would continue to expand in its sphere of influence. That was the standard strategy. But the Philippians also wanted to support Paul's work with prayer and money. They were his first planting to think of that.

Paul must have been overjoyed to receive this financial gift. For one thing, it meant that the Philippian group was healthy enough to be caring about God's wider purposes, not just personal needs. For another, it meant Paul could devote himself full time to talking about Christ instead of spending long hours at leatherworking.

He may well have sent Silas back to Philippi with a thank-you note, but if he did, it no longer exists. We do, however, have two letters Paul sent to Thessalonica about this time; Timothy played courier for the next six months or so.

Those letters gush with Paul's pride over his spiritual children and his longing to see them again. Evidently, news of the Thessalonians' tough faith in the face of suffering had spread in unexpected directions around the empire, for Thessalonica was a busy seaport. In a world full of cults, this group stood out for its love and commitment despite the odds.

The letters also stress the model Paul tried to set. In 1 Thessalonians 2 he wrote, "We are not trying to please men but God" (verse 4); "We could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you" (verses 6-7); "We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well" (verse 8); and "We worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone" (verse 9). Such attitudes, along with the courage to face persecution, would give the Thessalonian believers credibility among their skeptical neighbors.

Paul knew preaching like his could not touch those leathery hearts, but the changed life of a kinsman or coworker would gain Christ a hearing. So "how to live in order to please God" (1 Thessalonians 4:1)—an ethical, loving lifestyle—was his theme.

What undergirded that lifestyle was the hope that set the believers apart from the pagans around them. Their response to a loved one's death, for instance, could be confidence rather than despairing grief because they knew Jesus' promises about the future. Some unknown day, Jesus would return for His own, the dead ones would be raised to life, and all believers would be caught up to be with Jesus forever. God's people need never say permanent goodbyes. This certainty of resurrection could enable the Thessalonians to resist futile sensuality, face martyrdom calmly, and handle tragedy in ways that would make the pagans take notice.

In his second letter, Paul also responded to some prophecy or letter that was supposed to have come from him. Paul was reputedly saying that the Day of the Lord—the day of Jesus' return—had already come. No, said Paul, that would not happen until "the man of lawlessness" appeared, proclaimed himself God, and convinced many by working miracles. Paul's comments about this man of lawlessness (an evil world leader?) seem cryptic because in his letter he was simply alluding to things he'd said at length in person.

That's the hardest thing about interpreting the letters in the Bible. They were written to specific groups in specific situations, and all we have in each case is a small slice of an ongoing two-way discussion. It's like listening to part of one side of a telephone conversation and trying to figure out what's going on.

Legal Precedent

Compared to his stops in other towns up to this point, Paul spent an unusually long time in Corinth: a year and a half. Perhaps his (or God's) reasoning was that Corinth should become the kind of base for regional outreach that Antioch was in Syria. Trading hubs like those made ideal bases because people and information flowed through them so rapidly.

Paul's success in drawing key members of the Jewish

community to Christ (including an important synagogue official and a wealthy Gentile sympathizer) made him a stench in the Jews' nostrils, but they were unable to stage the kind of lynch mob that had been so effective in Thessalonica. Plan B was to bring charges against Paul in the Roman court. Freedom of religion was not an automatic right; a religion had to be explicitly authorized to be legal. Judaism was legal, and the Way of Jesus had always been seen as a Jewish sect. However, the Corinthian Jews insisted it was not Judaism at all, and therefore was not legal.

But to the Roman governor it seemed that both Paul and his accusers were Jews, and their argument had to do with Jewish doctrines. In refusing to try the case, he unknowingly set a precedent. For almost a decade more—a crucial period—the messengers of Christ had a precious legal umbrella. Had Gallio ruled against Paul, Christianity might have become immediately outlawed throughout the empire while it was still possibly too young to survive statewide persecution. A decade later, the fire would be too big to stamp out.

Personal Business

To say that Paul protested imposing Jewish rules on Gentiles is not to say that he himself turned his back on the customs he grew up with. Toward the end of his stay in Corinth, he made a vow as an act of thanksgiving and devotion to God (as prescribed in Numbers 6:1-21). The vow required that he visit Jerusalem to offer a sacrifice in the temple—Paul evidently saw nothing wrong with such Jewish rites. So he spent the spring and summer of AD 52 sailing to Jerusalem, visiting his friends in Antioch, hiking across Asia Minor with stops at the communities he'd planted, and finally arriving in Ephesus perhaps as winter was shutting down travel for the year.

Ephesus

Ephesus promised to be another strategic base for outreach, like Antioch and Corinth. It was the queen of the rich Roman province of Asia. Through her port passed goods from China and the eastern provinces bound for Italy. Wide avenues, huge public buildings and squares, and luxurious private homes were all

designed to impress tourists. A hundred local aristocrats owned most of the land around Ephesus and controlled the city government. However, the strength of the city was its large class of merchants, businessmen, and craftsmen. These people might be barely better fed than day laborers, nearly as wealthy as aristocrats, or somewhere in between, but none of them had any say in the government unless he was a "client" of one of the ruling hundred.

The business/working class tended to be politically dissatisfied and interested in any kind of new religion, so it was a fertile field for the messengers of Christ. Back in the spring, Paul had left Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus on his way east, and by the time he returned in the fall, they were already hard at work with their leather business as a base for contacting their target group. They had met a sophisticated Egyptian Jew who had learned some distorted version of the gospel in his hometown of Alexandria (where one of the empire's premier universities was always churning out the latest in esoteric philosophy). Once Priscilla and Aquila set him straight, Apollos turned out to be a gifted spokesman. He eventually moved on to Corinth to assist in teaching believers and debating unbelieving Jews.

A City in Turmoil

Paul spent three months appealing to the Ephesian Jews until their hostility drove him to shift his base from the synagogue to a lecture hall. He spent the normal working hours making tents with his partners, and the siesta time of 11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. teaching about Christ. He attracted a great following among the working class for his teaching, backing it up by miraculous healings and exorcisms. Ephesus was a hotbed of the occult, and Paul's miracle-working was just what many Ephesians needed to draw their attention. Supernatural power was something they took seriously. New converts burned a small fortune (more than two hundred years' wages for a laborer) in books of sorcery, and news about Christ spread throughout the metropolis and the surrounding area.

In fact, Paul's team was so successful during its two-year stay in this strategic city that its efforts rocked the local economy.

In a fragile system like Ephesus, this nearly spelled political disaster. Here's how it went:

Nearly every man in the business/working class belonged to a club with other men in his profession. Although these were social clubs, not political parties, Rome sometimes outlawed them because they encouraged sedition. The shipwrights or the weavers often rioted when they felt their interests threatened, for there was no peaceful, legal means of petitioning the government. Now one day a silversmith named Demetrius decided that his business was slumping because people weren't buying as many silver shrines of Artemis as they used to. He blamed the decline on Paul, who claimed the goddess Artemis was no goddess at all. Demetrius got the men of his club stirred up about this, and soon others in related trades joined them.

The issue wasn't just silverworking; it was a matter of civic pride that touched the number one industry: tourism. Of the dozens of gaudy temples in Ephesus, the greatest was dedicated to Artemis. It was the biggest tourist attraction in half the empire: resplendent with 127 marble pillars inlaid with gold; crammed with works by the world's leading artists; mobbed with sightseers, especially during the May fertility festival. Idolatry was big business, and Paul's preaching threatened it.

As happens in an already discontented ghetto, it took almost no time for a riot to erupt. Crowds chanted "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" in the streets, and one of Paul's team members was identified, seized, and carried bodily into the open-air theater. Paul wanted to address the mob, but he had a friend or two among the city's ruling aristocrats, and they begged him not to enter the theater. In the end, one of the top city officials managed to silence the crowd, but only with threats of Roman intervention. This was no idle warning; Rome was known to suppress riots ruthlessly.

Lynching was averted, but Paul knew he had reached the end of his welcome in Ephesus. The end of his job as well. He and his team had launched a fine, healthy community; it could carry on spreading the gospel to neighbors and coworkers, while the mobile team moved on to untouched ground.

Crisis in Corinth

Acts 20:1-3, 1 and 2 Corinthians

Bad news

If Paul had had nothing else to do in Ephesus but make a living and nurture former occultists in the ways of Jesus, he would have had his hands full. But he was also keeping tabs on affairs in the other cities he'd worked in. Most of his seedlings were apparently flourishing, despite hostile soil. But the Corinthian group became a nuisance during his last year in Ephesus.

First came news that a member of the community had a sexual alliance with his father's wife (presumably not his mother). Paul wrote to Corinth with instructions not to associate with someone like that; blatant incest of a kind that shocked even pagans brought disgrace on the people of God.

Sometime later a believer named Chloe visited Paul in Ephesus and brought more discouraging news. The Corinthian group was splitting into factions, each of which claimed some prominent Christian leader as its authority. Several of the factions expressed contempt for Paul and his messages telling them what to do. Then three Corinthians brought Paul a letter from the whole community. This letter was full of questions about various issues, but the messengers also reported that the incest was continuing,