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Missiology

Lesson 10 – Paul Brings the Gospel to Athens and Corinth

The next stop for Paul was Athens. Athens was the center of Greek culture with a remarkable history of famous thinkers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. **“Those who conducted Paul brought him to Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him with all speed they departed. Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols”** (Acts 17:15-16). What may have impressed other visitors as great art was idolatry in Paul’s eyes. There were shrines to gods and goddesses of all kinds. Even though Paul was alone, he did not waste his time in Athens. There was a Jewish synagogue there, and so **“he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers”** (Acts 17:17). We are not told of any results from this work, either positive or negative. But Paul also ventured out into the purely Gentile world. **“He reasoned ... in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there”** (Acts 17:17).

Paul did manage to engage in conversation with **“certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers”** (Acts 17:18). Paul **“preached to them Jesus and the resurrection”** but they could not understand very well what he was saying. **“Some said, ‘What does this babbler want to say?’ Others said, ‘He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods’”** (Acts 17:18). It seems they thought that Jesus was one such foreign god, and “Resurrection” was another.

Athens was a good place for to discuss such things. **“For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing”** (Acts 17:21). What new thing was Paul talking about? They wanted to know more. These philosophers **“took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, ‘May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean’”** (Acts 17:19-20).

This was a golden opportunity for Paul to address the cultural elite residents of Athens, and his method for reaching them was considerably different from his method in the synagogue. He did not refer to the history of the Jewish people, nor did he quote the Old Testament prophets. Such things would have meant little or nothing to the Greeks. He started out by telling them his impression of their city: **“Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD”** (Acts 17:22-23). Apparently, the Athenians did not want to overlook any of the many deities they claimed to worship. Paul realized they knew very little about the only true living God in the

midst of all their idolatry. He wanted to make tell them about the one true God who has saved them.

Every human being has access to some information concerning the true God. Paul later wrote to the Christians in Rome: **“What may be known of God is manifest in them** (that is, the Gentiles, the heathen), **for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man – and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things”** (Romans 1:19-23). They **“exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator”** (Romans 1:25).

We call this knowledge of God the natural knowledge of God, that is, what we can know about God from nature – from observing the world and what is in it. What is it we can learn from creation? We can know that there is a God, or possibly a team of gods, who created the world and therefore they were there before the world existed, and they have incredible power and wisdom. Paul also added that the heathen have a natural fear of this God or gods. They know **“the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things** (the various sins mentioned in the previous verses) **are deserving of death”** (Romans 1:32). In other words, all human beings have a feeling that there is some kind of powerful Being out there to whom they are responsible and to whom they will have to give account. Paul also says that all human beings **“show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing them or else excusing them”** (Romans 2:15). Having a conscience means having a consciousness of God and a knowledge of the law, and thus also having thoughts that excuse them or accuse them of doing wrong by their own thoughts, words, and deeds.

In his address to the heathen in Athens, Paul used their natural knowledge of God to teach certain things about God that they could easily grasp, because such things appeared true to their own thoughts and experiences. He said: **“God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands, nor is He worshiped with men’s hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also His offspring.’ Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man’s devising”** (Acts 17:24-29).

Some of the Greek poets had realized that they were the creatures of a Creator, who not only made them but also gave them all the blessings they enjoyed: their very life and breath, their ability to think and move. Therefore, they were not thinking clearly when they built all the shrines and temples for their gods. God had made them; they could not make God or gods. They needed God; God did not need them. The wisest among them would readily agree with what Paul was telling them, since it agreed with their own built-in knowledge of God.

In our presentation the Gospel, it is always wise to proceed from things the audience knows and can agree with to things which no one can understand, namely, the Gospel itself – the Good News of what God has done for the world through Jesus Christ. This is what Paul did in his address at Athens. And so, after describing the God they already knew to a certain extent, Paul went on to bring out the urgency of his message and to introduce them to Jesus Christ, God's Son. He told them: **"God ... now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead"** (Acts 17:30-31).

Paul wanted the Athenians to determine for themselves whether they were ready to face their Maker. God is calling all nations to get ready for the great Judgment Day when they will have to give an account for their lives. Are they ready for that day? God has already chosen the day when that will take place. He has already chosen the Man who will be the Judge on that day. We know who He is because He has risen from the dead. Paul certainly planned to continue his address by showing how this Man Jesus has prepared us for this Judgment Day by dying for our sins and winning for the world forgiveness of sins and eternal life. That is the Gospel.

But it seems most of Paul's listeners did not give him that opportunity. **"When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, 'We will hear you again on this matter.' So Paul departed from among them"** (Acts 17:32-33). Nevertheless, there were a few who were willing to hear him out. **"Some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them"** (Acts 17:34). No doubt a little congregation of Christians was formed in Athens, but we hear no more about them in the New Testament.

Even though Silas and Timothy had not yet joined him from Berea, **"Paul departed from Athens and went to Corinth"** (Acts 18:1). Corinth was a busy commercial city. Its location on an isthmus made it a natural center for land traffic between north and south and sea traffic between east and west. Corinth had a reputation as a place of loose sexual morals. Perhaps Paul was wondering whether the Gospel of Christ would flourish in such a wicked city.

Paul was by himself in Corinth for a while. **"And he found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla (because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome); and he came to them. So, because he was**

of the same trade, he stayed with them and worked; for by occupation they were tentmakers” (Acts 18:2-3). Paul received only occasional financial support from others. He preferred to support himself as a tentmaker, and in Corinth he found a Jewish couple, Aquila and Priscilla, who were also tentmakers. He lived with them and worked with them for some time. The Roman Emperor Claudius had recently told all the Jews to leave Rome, and that is why this Jewish couple were now living in Corinth. We are not told if Aquila and Priscilla knew about Jesus at this time, but we know that later they were faithful and active Christians.

It is very likely that Paul met Aquila and Priscilla in the Jewish synagogue in Corinth, for Paul **“reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks”** (Acts 18:4). Apparently the synagogue services in Corinth were frequented not only by Jews, but by God-fearing Gentiles who had become acquainted with Old Testament Scriptures and joined the Jews in their worship.

After some time, Silas and Timothy finally left Macedonia and rejoined Paul in Corinth. At this point we are told that **“Paul was compelled by the Spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus is the Christ”** (Acts 18:5). As in so many other places, the Jews in Corinth vigorously opposed this message. **“When they opposed him and blasphemed, he shook his garments and said to them, ‘Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles’”** (Acts 18:6). This was in keeping with the instruction Jesus had given to His twelve apostles before they went out on a preaching mission: **“Whoever will not receive you nor hear you, when you depart from there, shake off the dust under your feet as a testimony against them”** (Mark 6:11).

Paul did not have to go far to find another place where he could preach Christ and Him crucified. After Paul departed from the synagogue, he **“entered the house of a certain man named Justus, one who worshiped God, whose house was next door to the synagogue”** (Acts 18:7). Two contrary religious teachings were being taught side by side in Corinth. From one spot the true Gospel is being proclaimed publicly, but right next door, just as publicly, comes false teaching and blasphemy in fierce opposition to Christ and His Gospel. This same pattern continues to this very day in many places throughout the world. When we pray **“Thy kingdom come”**, we are praying for the Gospel of Christ to flourish and the enemies of the Gospel to fail.

The Gospel was making its way into people’s hearts in Corinth. Even **“Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his household. And many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized”** (Acts 18:8). Certainly there was joy in heaven among the angels of God, for Jesus had said: **“He who believes and is baptized will be saved”** (Mark 16:16).

But this was only the beginning of a large harvest of souls in Corinth. Paul received a special message from the Lord of the harvest, Jesus Himself, to give him courage and assurance for the task ahead of him in Corinth: **“The Lord spoke to Paul in the night by a vision, ‘Do not**

be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city.’ And he continued there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them” (Acts 18:9-11). After his experiences of being persecuted or rejected in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens, Paul was no doubt expecting the same thing to happen in Corinth. But Jesus assured him that that would not happen in Corinth. He and his partners were able to stay in Corinth for a whole year and a half. Surely the Word of God that Paul spoke did not return void, or without favorable results. We read that congregation in Corinth was made up of **“many people.”**

Although Paul was clearly the leader and main speaker among the missionaries, he wisely did not insist on doing all the work himself. In particular he did not administer many baptisms in Corinth. He did not want the people to become overly attached to him; he wanted them to be attached to Christ. In his first letter to the Corinthians, which Paul wrote on his third mission journey, he reminded them: **“I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, lest anyone should say that I had baptized in my own name. Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas. Besides, I do not know whether I baptized any other. For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the Gospel”** (1 Corinthians 1:14-17). Other members of the group were called to perform the baptisms.

What kind of people did the Holy Spirit bring into the Corinthian congregation? Paul wrote in his first letter: **“Not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence”** (1 Corinthians 1:26-29). The congregation in Corinth was made up of unimportant people, for the most part. There were a few wise, a few mighty, a few noble people among them, but the rest would be labeled by the world as foolish, despised, and weak – nobodies. The same thing is true in our Christian congregations today. Jesus even thanked His Father that this is the way God works. He prayed: **“I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight”** (Matthew 11:25-26). God does not want anyone to glory himself in His presence.

Paul himself was no master orator or great speaker. He wrote to the Christians in Corinth of how he first came to them. **“I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God”** (1 Corinthians 2:1-5). The Gospel itself is the power of God and the wisdom of God, and that is what Paul spoke in Corinth, **“not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches”**

(1 Corinthians 2:13). The Holy Spirit formed the congregation in Corinth by means of the Gospel in Word and Sacrament, as He continues to do to today in many congregations around the world.

One reason that Paul was able to stay as long as he did in Corinth was that he enjoyed the protection of the Roman government. As usual, the majority of the Jews opposed him and his message. And so, **“when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul and brought him to the judgment seat, saying, ‘This fellow persuades men to worship God contrary to the law.’ And when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, ‘If it were a matter of wrongdoing or wicked crimes, O Jews, there would be reason why I should bear with you. But if it is a questions of words and names and your own law, look to it yourselves; for I do not want to be a judge of such matters.’ And he drove them from the judgment seat”** (Acts 18:12-16). Gallio was not going to take sides in any religious dispute. He was there to judge and punish crime, not to determine who was right in religious questions.

In the United States we have what is called religious freedom. Each group is free to practice any kind of religion it pleases, as long as it does not involve committing crimes, such as murder or theft. Religious freedom is a precious gift from God, and we should treasure it and do what we can to protect it. Many countries around the world do not enjoy religious freedom, and therefore governmental authorities may not always protect the rights of Christians to worship the true God according to the Scriptures. Gallio was a wise ruler and did not want to interfere in matters of religion.

What happened next in Corinth brings no praise or credit to Gallio. We read: **“Then all the Greeks took Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him before the judgment seat, but Gallio took no notice of these things”** (Acts 18:17). It seems that Gallio should have protected Sosthenes, but he just let it go and did nothing.

After this incident **“Paul still remained a good while”** (Acts 18:18) in Corinth. **“Then he took leave of the brethren and sailed for Syria, and Priscilla and Aquila were with him. He had his hair cut off at Cenchrea, for he had taken a vow”** (Acts 18:18). Apparently Paul had made a temporary Nazarite vow, which involved the growing of one’s hair. In a Nazarite vow, when the period of the vow came to an end, the person who made the vow would cut his hair and give the hair to the Lord. That is why this haircut is mentioned in the Bible.

From Corinth Paul sailed across the sea to Ephesus, the capital of the Roman province of Asia. Aquila and Priscilla, the tentmaking couple, went with him and stayed in Ephesus. Paul **“himself entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. When they asked him to stay a longer time with them, he did not consent, but took leave of them, saying, ‘I must by all means keep this coming feast in Jerusalem; but I will return again to you, God willing”** (Acts 18:19-21). Paul had wanted to go to Ephesus earlier, but now he did not want to stay there. It seems he wanted to arrive in Jerusalem by the time of a certain Jewish festival. Perhaps this was in connection with his vow.

“And when he had landed at Caesarea, and gone up and greeted the church, he went down to Antioch” (Acts 18:22). When the text says he went up and greeted the church, this no doubt means that he went up to Jerusalem from the coastal city of Caesarea, and from Jerusalem (in the hill country), he then went down to Antioch in Syria, which another coastal city. It was from Antioch that Paul had set out on his first and mission journeys, and now it was time to set out again from Antioch on his third mission journey. One place he was sure to visit was Ephesus.

Questions

1. What was the city of Athens known for?
2. Where did Paul find opportunity to preach the Gospel in Athens?
3. What kind of religion was practiced in Athens?
4. What is meant by the natural knowledge of God?
5. What kind of success did the Gospel of Christ have in Athens?
6. What was the city of Corinth known for?
7. How did Paul support himself in Corinth?
8. Why was Paul unable to continue speaking in the Jewish synagogue in Corinth?
9. What kind of special encouragement did God give Paul in Corinth?
10. How many leaders and influential people became Christians in Corinth?
11. Why did Gallio not want to judge the case against Paul?
12. What is meant by religious liberty?
13. What problem arises for Christians when there is no religious liberty?