

Acts of the Apostles

When many students of scripture consider the book of Acts, their attention is often drawn to the day of Pentecost, the initial outpouring of the Spirit upon those gathered in the upper room and the subsequent events that mark these, “Acts of the Apostles,” as they traveled throughout the world, peaching Jesus, and the kingdom of God ___ with miracles, signs and wonders following ___ being empowered by the Word of God, and the Anointing they received, working in and through them. Unfortunately the emphasis seems to be placed on the operation of the gifts and the “phenomena” surrounding the demonstration of those gifts.

Its very easy to miss some significant lessons that teach us of God’s ways, purpose, and “principles” that are mysteriously “hidden” within events as they’ve been recorded, even though they are written in plain language. All too often our perception while reading of these accounts is related to the “early Church” and how those of “the Way” established “churches,” added to their numbers, and established leadership from within their ranks. Many in today’s “churches” are revisiting these scriptures in order to, “reinvent” the early church and establish themselves as a, “New Testament Church.” Trying to re-discover or recover the “formula” for doing church the way it was done at the beginning is a futile pathway that will lead to total failure.

Chapter seventeen of the Acts of the Apostles begins to give us some of the more detailed experiences of Paul, Sylvanus, (Silas), and Timothy, (among others), and is a clear view of the people, places, and prevailing influences found in Thessalonica, Berea and the whole region of Macedonia, including Athens, (Greece), when Paul served in these places. We can easily identify with the whole scenario and see many parallels to the present “state of affairs” in various cities of the modern world. Many of the current “systems” we recognize as being in “decline” are the same kinds, i.e., religious, political, commercial, educational, etc., that made Thessalonica a major “player” in the affairs of the whole of the Roman Empire.

“Thessalonica was the seat of the governor and thus practically the capital of the whole province. In 58 BC Cicero spent the greater part of his exile there, at the house of the quaestor Plancius (Pro Plancio 41, 99; Epistle Ad Att, iii.8-21). In the civil war between Caesar and Pompey, Thessalonica took the senatorial side and formed one of Pompey's chief bases (49-48 BC), but in the final struggle of the republic, six years later, it proved loyal to Antony and Octavian, and was rewarded by receiving the status and privileges of a "Free City." It was important, not only as a harbor with a large import and export trade, but also as the principal station on the great Via Egnatia, the highway from the Adriatic to the Hellespont.”

“Paul visited the city, together with Silas and Timothy, on his 2nd missionary journey. He had been at Philippi, and traveled thence by the Egnatian Road, passing through Amphipolis and Apollonia on the way (Acts 17:1). He found at Thessalonica a synagogue of the Jews, in which for three successive Sabbaths he preached the gospel, basing his message upon the types and prophecies of the Old Testament Scriptures (Acts 17:2,3). Some of the Jews became converts and a considerable number of proselytes and Greeks, together with many women of high social standing (Acts 17:4). Among these converts were in all probability Aristarchus and Secundus, natives of Thessalonica, whom we afterward find accompanying Paul to Asia at the close of his 3rd missionary journey (Acts 20:4). The former of them was, indeed, one of the apostle's most constant companions; we find him with Paul at Ephesus (Acts 19:29) and on his journey to Rome.” (International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. 1915.)

NOTE: Sometimes it helps to have a bit of history ___ which gives us a “feel” for the conditions those of

Thessalonica were influenced by daily__ and the atmosphere in which Paul, Silas and Timothy were serving the Lord.

Reading Paul's letters to the Thessalonians, (considered by many "experts" to have been written while in Corinth __ around 52-53AD, and the first of his letters to the churches), enlarges or expands our understanding of the afflictions those who had received the "gospel" had endured. It is evident the believers were able, by the grace of God, to continue in the faith and love of the brethren, because they had received the word of Paul, Sylvanus and Timothy, and, "You accepted *it* not *as* the word of men, but *for* what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe." The word they heard was received in much tribulation and those who heard were enduring persecution and affliction from their own countrymen and the Jews who opposed the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The word on the street was that Paul and his company were declaring "another" as King, instead of Caesar, which stirred up the whole community against them and eventually caused Paul to make the decision to go to Athens in order to avoid bringing more suffering to Jason's household, where he was staying.

All of these things were accomplished through the power of God that was working "in them" and are not a result of outward demonstrations of the "anointing upon," which is being emphasized by so many today. The emphasis we see in Paul's letters to the Thessalonians is not on gifts, miracles, signs or wonders. There is no mention of being baptized in the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues. No healing, deliverance or getting anyone "saved." The emphasis is on dealing with every kind of impurity and immoral act; enduring tremendous sufferings; strengthening their faith; preserving them blameless; hard work; being at peace with one another; loving one another; admonishing the unruly, encouraging the fainthearted, helping the weak, being patient with everyone; and to continue to be "imitators" of those who ministered __ not out of greed or looking for glory for themselves__ and to be "imitators of Christ."

In essence, the believers in Thessalonica were being prepared for the kingdom of God and the world to come. They were being cared for, nurtured, and developed as sons of light __ as sons of day. They were not of those who were saying, "Peace and safety" __ not realizing they were of the "night" and living in "darkness," or that the wrath of God would overtake them like a thief in the night.

The general populace of Thessalonica were a prosperous, self indulgent, immoral, idol worshipping, decadent people who gloried in their recognition as a "free city," which we might identify as "Liberals" in our own present social order. They were recipients of all the wealth and influences brought into that region by the many diverse cultures and peoples who traveled the Egnatian Road, or entered their ports and traded their goods, ideas, and ideals. They also brought every kind of abominable religious practice and "new age" philosophy to spread among the undisciplined, undiscerning, and unbelieving who gladly received them.

The instruction given to those who were "chosen," (The church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ), was to, "Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; give thanks in everything as it is God's will and to not quench the Spirit or despise prophecy." In all of this they were admonished to examine everything "carefully;" hold fast to what is good; to abstain from every form of evil," and to "walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory." The counsel they received was to "gain" the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, having been chosen from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. (Salvation was what they expected to obtain __ at the end of their process of suffering, being tested but growing in faith and love, remaining strong in the Lord, and holding fast to the teaching they received __ not when they "first believed".)

If we could only see that this is the gospel of the kingdom of God, and the resurrection power of Jesus Christ, being demonstrated by the “Church” that Christ was/is building ___ not only in Thessalonica ___ but throughout the whole of Macedonia and regions beyond, and that these “principles” are what are lacking in most of what we call “Christianity” today, it may help us to seek God’s grace to enable us to cease from “unrighteous/dead works” and begin to give us a different perspective on the “will of God.” It could change the emphasis from the “gifts” to the “Giver” and may help those who name the name of Jesus to become more encouraged to “win Christ,” instead of winning the approval of men ___ only to be found among those who will be ashamed at His appearing.

One of the “hidden principles,” found in the letters Paul wrote to these saints at Thessalonica, is revealed in the truth of “those who heard,” **accepting** the word that was spoken, not as from men seeking their own glory, but, as what it really is ___ the word of God. There is a major difference between hearing/receiving the word and “accepting” it. Only the “accepted word” is able to perform its life changing work in those who really, “hear with faith ___ believing.” Then, and only then will the word become what James was inspired to record in his Epistle, i.e., “Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the **engrafted word**, which is able to save your souls.” (Jas 1:21 KJV)

The “gospel” the apostles preached in every place they visited did not come in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit, with full conviction, and the people came to know what sort of men they were. Paul, Silas and Timothy worked tirelessly day and night and provided for themselves, not asserting the authority they could have, as apostles of Christ. They showed by the Life that was in them how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly they behaved. Sadly, their testimony is rarely found among those who minister in the “churches” today, which increases their limitations and ineffectiveness.

After being sent away at night, by the brethren from Thessalonica, Paul and Silas preached Christ to some “noble-minded Jews, in the synagogue in Berea, who received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily *to see* whether these things were so and many of them “believed.” (See Acts 17:11) When the Jews at Thessalonica heard that Paul was proclaiming the word in Berea they went there and stirred up the crowd. Silas and Timothy remained in Berea until Paul, who had been escorted by some of the brethren to Athens, sent word for them to come as soon as possible.

“Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols. So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing *Gentiles*, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present. And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. Some were saying, “What would this idle babbler wish to say?” Others, “He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,”— because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming? “For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean.” (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)” (Act 17:16-21 NASB)

What Paul did, and what he proclaimed to those to whom he spoke in Athens, is not much different from what we find happening to those who are being “provoked in their spirit” to speak out concerning the conditions and abominations they are finding when they visit the religious, philosophical, idol worshipers who are attending “church” each week. When Jesus, and the resurrection are preached from the Kingdom perspective the message is often considered as “babble from an idle babbler” or, “strange things about some, strange deities.” Among the listeners there are always some who have

attended for the purpose of hearing, “some new thing,” which is why they go from church to church, conference to conference or home group to home group.

“Then they took him and brought him up to the Areopagus, asking him, “May we be told what this new teaching of yours is? For the things you are saying sound strange to us. We should therefore like to be told exactly what they mean.” (For all the Athenians and their foreign visitors used to devote their whole leisure to telling or hearing about something new.) So Paul, taking his stand in the centre of the Areopagus, spoke as follows: “Men of Athens, I perceive that you are in every respect remarkably religious. For as I passed along and observed the things you worship, I found also an altar bearing the inscription, ‘TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.’

“The Being, therefore, whom you, without knowing Him, revere. Him I now proclaim to you. GOD who made the universe and everything in it--He, being Lord of Heaven and earth, does not dwell in sanctuaries built by men. Nor is He ministered to by human hands, as though He needed anything--but He Himself gives to all men life and breath and all things. He caused to spring from one forefather people of every race, for them to live on the whole surface of the earth, and marked out for them an appointed span of life and the boundaries of their homes; that they might seek God, if perhaps they could grope for Him and find Him. Yes, though He is not far from any one of us. For it is in closest union with Him that we live and move and have our being; as in fact some of the poets in repute among yourselves have said, ‘For we are also His offspring.’

Since then we are God's offspring, we ought not to imagine that His nature resembles gold or silver or marble, or anything sculptured by the art and inventive faculty of man. Those times of ignorance God viewed with indulgence. But now He commands all men everywhere to repent, seeing that He has appointed a day on which, before long, He will judge the world in righteousness, through the instrumentality of a man whom He has pre-destined to this work, and has made the fact certain to every one by raising Him from the dead.” (Act 17:19-31 WNT)

We aren't told how often Paul spoke to the men and women in Athens but we do see, as we continue to the end of Acts 17, that Paul was laying foundations by informing them, as God's offspring, that God would no longer wink at men's ignorance, i.e., imagining that His nature resembles gold or silver or marble, or anything sculptured by the art and inventive faculty of man, and exhorted them __ and all men everywhere __ to obey His command to repent.

The command to repent is based upon the fact that He has appointed a day on which, before long, He will judge the world in righteousness, through the instrumentality of a man whom He has pre-destined to this work, and has made the fact certain to every one by raising Him from the dead." When Paul spoke of the resurrection there were some who scoffed/sneered, while others said they would like to hear more and a few joined themselves to Paul, having accepted the word and believed by faith.

As it was in Thessalonica and Berea, so it was at Athens. There is no record of miracles, signs, or gifts of the Spirit being the focus of Paul's ministry. It is evident that he was not seeking his own glory by presenting himself as the Apostle of Christ and telling of his great accomplishments __ planting New Testament Churches at Phillipi, Thessalonica, and Berea. He didn't lay out his itinerary and tell them they could come to the conference he was going to hold in Corinth, if they wanted to know more. He was led by the Spirit and knew that it was in Christ __ he lived, moved and had his being.

Some “Commentators” say that Paul left Athens and went to Corinth because the Gospel made very little progress among the Athenians. Unfortunately, that's the kind of ignorance that motivates many claiming to be Apostles, Prophets, etc., to plan their “conventions/conferences” as they seek to be part of the “latest move” or, “My funds are beginning to dry up so I think I'll go to Tinsletown, where I know a Pastor who will let me speak, and I know the people are generous. These folks at Smalltown just weren't ready for my message, and they aren't as “giving.” “Why, I barely made plane fare and had to stay in one

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of the "Old Hotels."

When Paul arrived at Corinth, he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, having recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. He came to them, and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and they were working, for by trade they were tent-makers.

"Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. But when the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized. One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city." So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God." (Act 18:4-11)

Determining a time-line of Paul's journey to Corinth, the time he remained there, and when he wrote the letter Titled: "I Corinthians" from Ephesus __ around 57AD __ we are looking at a four to five year period for these events, beginning at Thessalonica, to take place.

The **result** of Paul's remaining in Corinth for a year and a half __ teaching them the word of God __ is related in verses 5-7 of I Cor., which, according to I Cor 5:9, was not his "First" letter to the sanctified in Christ at Corinth, and that result was, "In every thing ye were enriched in him, in all discourse and all knowledge, according as the testimony of the Christ was confirmed in you, so that ye are not behind in any gift, waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Young's Literal Translation) Weymouth translates the underlined portion as, "My testimony as to the Christ has been confirmed in your experience."

Consider also what Paul had written to the Corinthian believers, sometime before this first recorded letter, "not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler--not even to eat with such a one." (I Cor 5:11NASB), or __ as Weymouth puts it __ "what I meant was that you were not to associate with any one bearing the name of "brother," if he was addicted to fornication or avarice or idol-worship or abusive language or hard-drinking or greed of gain. With such a man you ought not even to eat." (1Co 5:11WNT) We know he was not speaking about the people, "in/of the world," but about those who are called "brothers." This shows us that a very short time had passed from the time Paul was with them and the time he wrote that they were "unspiritual and are living and acting like mere men of the world." (I Cor 3:3WNT)

Even though the Church at Corinth came behind in no gift, (and the testimony of Christ was confirmed in them), it is evident that __ as "babes in Christ" __ they had not grown in their "new nature" to any measure of the "fullness of Christ," or been developed in His Character. Keeping in mind that Paul wrote to them from Ephesus, it seems clear, at least to me, why Paul spoke the following words to the "Leaders" in the Church at Ephesus:

"But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God. "And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face. "Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. "For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God. "Be on guard for yourselves and for all

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the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. "Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears. "And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build *you* up and to give *you* the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. (Act 20:24-32)

What I'm trusting will be learned from what has been written thus far, is that the "Acts of the Apostles" incorporate much more than what is being presented as the "full gospel" by many of the so called, "Ministers/Ministries," in the visible church systems __ who more closely fit the description of those Paul cautions the "overseers/shepherds" __ to be on guard against coming in among them and not sparing the sheep.

I've been a witness to some of those who call themselves Apostles/Prophets coming into churches __ full of immature lambs/sheep who have very little discernment __ and speaking, "perverse things to draw away the disciples after themselves." Unfortunately, many of those in the pews have been "conditioned" to get over-excited about the manifestation of the gifts of the Spirit, and are continually looking for occurrences of super-natural phenomena associated with certain "ministers/ministries." I'm not against the freedom to move in/with the Spirit nor am I opposed to expressing or operating in the "Gifts." However, they are given to the "Church" as a witness to the "unbelievers among them" and to edify/build up the "believers," __ not to make everybody get goose bumps, have the hair on the back of their neck stand up, have an outburst of uncontrolled laughter, or fall out under the "power." Too much of what may be considered, "Acts of the Apostles" is, in reality __ the "Flesh Acting Up!"

(To be Continued?)

