

INTRODUCTION

The theme of the Book of Acts is Christ enlarging God's Kingdom through his messengers and the Holy Spirit. The gospel message often raised hostility, but the Spirit used it to transform many lives and form the worldwide church. It showed the meaning of Christ's words, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ..." (Matthew 28:18-20).

Acts chapter 18 shows what Christ did when the Apostle Paul went to Corinth.

THE PLACE AND THE PEOPLE

It was a city of 3/4 million people and a centre of international trade similar to London or Shanghai today.

Its success and wealth had a downside. There was a strong sense of superiority and a feeling that they could do whatever they wanted. Even in that society Corinth was noted for immorality - the temple of Venus used 1000 prostitutes. The rest may be imagined.

In that situation the gospel was not likely to receive a welcome. They welcomed celebrity, and anyone who did not try to impress had little credibility. The message of a crucified Saviour sounded foolish. The ethical standards the gospel implies contrasted with their moral relativism and laxity. Even speaking about forgiveness was an implied criticism. A God of faithfulness, integrity, and mercy was alien to their way of thinking.

The description of Corinth sounds similar to our society. It is hard to get a hearing unless you make big claims about yourself. (Even some Christians have fallen into that way of thinking). The idea of freedom of choice has been taken so far that people think they have a right to do whatever they want, and no one has a right to criticise (because that sounds like a denial of equality). That is especially the case with regard to sexual ethics.

The gospel does have a certain appeal for it meets the deepest human longings (for loyalty, community, mercy, etc). But those longings are usually trumped by what is superficial.

Whenever the gospel is welcomed the explanation has to be that Christ has worked in the heart of its hearers.

That reminds us that Christ's work involves the Spirit as well as the Word. Paul later wrote to the church in Corinth, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth" (1 Corinthians 3:6).

HOW THE WORK BEGAN

Paul began by linking with some of his own people - Christian Jews. He had to eat, and he needed shelter and company, so he began to work with them for Aquila and Priscilla were also tentmakers.

They had also experienced suffering for the sake of Christ - Caesar had expelled all Jews from Rome on account of disturbances involving "Chrestus", thought to refer to a violent reaction against the gospel of Christ. It was a case of Christians suffering at the hands of both secular and religious forces.

Paul began in the synagogue. It was an obvious point of contact. But there was another reason. God had given the message of the coming Christ to the Jewish nation - it was only right that the gospel should be taken to them first, for Christ belonged to them before being offered to others.

Jewish hopes were invested in the coming Christ - he was the One God had promised, who would free his people from their enemies, sin, Satan and death included. They heard from Paul that God had kept his promise; that Jesus was the Christ.

In his approach to his work Paul avoided two temptations. One was to insist on his rights and charge his hearers for the instruction they received. Other thinkers did that (and everyone is entitled to receive something in return for the benefit he gives). But people might have accused him of doing it for the money, and he wanted his hearers to see that he had an unselfish motive - Christ deserved to be publicised (1 Corinthians 9:12-16).

Some time later he received financial support from the church in Philippi that allowed him to spend all his time on gospel work.

The other temptation was to try and make a big impression in order to give the message credibility. But their 'faith' would then have been the result of something merely human rather than the effect of the message of a crucified Saviour. That message has power, and that power is the only one that can save a sinner and make a person a disciple if Jesus.

CHANGE OF DIRECTION

There is such a thing as rejection. The synagogue generally rejected Paul's message that Jesus is the Christ. A time may come when Christ's messengers are no longer obliged to remain with the people to whom he sent them initially. Paul dramatically left the synagogue and began to work with non-Jews. Judging by appearances, that was unlikely to be successful.

It must have seemed a notable victory to his opponents. But it was soon followed by encouraging happenings. The synagogue ruler believed, and he was baptised along with his household.

Then Christ spoke directly to Paul in a vision. It was like when God appeared to Old Testament saints - "Do not be afraid." He promised his presence, his protection, and his blessing on the work. It was similar to what he said earlier to his apostles about having "other sheep" whom he would gather into his fold.

OUTCOME

It was a turning point, although it did not seem so at first. Paul was taken to court accused of teaching what was not legal. Judaism was a recognised religion and therefore permitted. Paul's enemies implied that his teaching was not part of Judaism and therefore illegal. (It reminds us of the tendency of the UK's Equality Act on what is taught about sexual ethics). Christianity could have become a forbidden religion under Roman law.

But the Proconsul decided he could not judge religious disputes within Judaism since it involved interpretations of their scriptures. The case was dismissed. Christ showed that he was King of kings and Lord of Lords.

His power in Providence was accompanied by his power to change the heart of man. Many Corinthians believed the gospel, and the church formed there.

We get a picture of that church from two letters Paul wrote to it. There were predictable weaknesses. Pride led to partisan strife and a tendency to listen to people who were big on image but neglected what Paul had taught them. They were impressed with the spectacular but short on love. The immoral atmosphere of the city also led to immorality within the church.

In spite of those problems they were a church of Jesus Christ and Paul loved them.