

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP STUDY IN THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES - PART EIGHTEEN - CHAPTERS 17 AND 18

Having established the first church in Europe at Philippi, Paul, Silas and Timothy moved south through three cities, Thessalonica, Berea and Athens, each of which presented a different challenge. The different results of their ministry correspond to the very different attitudes to the gospel of their hearers, as in the parable of the sower.(Matt.13) At the same time there were also enormously different levels of previous knowledge of God and the scriptures which likewise affected the outcome of preaching. Paul's methods of teaching were carefully chosen to meet these differences between his audiences. We can learn a great deal from the methods he used which were certainly not stereotyped.

In Thessalonica Paul began as usual in the synagogue.(17:1) He always looked first for those who had some knowledge of the scriptures and should have been prepared for his message. For three weeks he took a systematic teaching approach.(17:2) He reasoned because the gospel is logical. But his reasoning was from the scriptures because truth is revealed from the mind of God to the mind of man. 'Explaining' means literally 'opening up' as in dissecting in anatomy, or stripping down an engine. 'Giving evidence' means literally 'placing before' as in showing someone else what we have found in such a way that they are convinced by what they see.(17:3) As usual with Jews, Paul had one clear objective, to convince them that the New Testament man, Jesus of Nazareth, was the Old Testament promised Christ or Messiah. He saw that if they were persuaded of this, the normal consequence would be faith in Jesus Christ.(17:4) The immediate evidence of their faith was in their identification with other believers. As so often before, faith in some was met by a reaction of unbelief, jealousy and violence in others. Any victim was better than none so they picked on Jason and his friends. The accusation against them was a remarkable testimony to the effectiveness of their witness, although their accusers as usual had it wrong. Far from 'turning the world upside down', God had been using them to turn people's lives the right way up.(17:6) The implication that submission to Jesus meant rebellion against the Roman Emperor was quite untrue.(Rom.13:1)

Thessalonica was an important city and naval base in Paul's time. It had a place of privilege in the Roman system, having sided with the eventual winners in the civil war a century before. The Jews seemed to be playing on this traditional loyalty in the charge they brought against Paul and the others.(17:7-9) Thessalonica still exists in the Greek city of Salonika. Paul was to have a continuing close relationship with the Christians there. He wrote them two letters, and at least two Thessalonians travelled with him in his mobile Bible school.(Acts 20:4) One of them, Aristarchus, survived a near lynching,(19:29) and went on to become one of Paul's fellow prisoners in Rome. (Col.4:10)

Berea by comparison was a rather insignificant city some 50 miles inland which might easily have been bypassed as being of no great strategic importance. God knew that it held enormous potential and so He sent His representatives there. The Jews of Berea were described as 'more noble-minded'. They were not aristocrats but ordinary people with open hearts prepared to check Paul's message out in the Bible for themselves. They did not believe Paul unless they found his message in agreement with scripture. When they did, they believed in great numbers. It is enormously exciting when we meet people, whether Christians yet or not, prepared to check out our message in the Bible for themselves. Far from feeling threatened by those who look up the Bible to see if our message is right, we should be excited by their openness to God, and expect great things. Again God's action brought the Devil's reaction. Paul moved on to take the pressure off the new Christians.(17:10-15)

Paul travelled further south to Athens, a very different place, characterised by philosophy and a spirit of inquiry. Five centuries before it had been the city of Socrates and many other intellectual giants of Greek history. It is regarded as the birthplace of democracy. Paul's first impression was not of the cleverness of the Athenians but of their superstition. His approach to Athens was two-pronged. On the one hand he went to the synagogue looking for future leaders who already knew their Bibles. On the other hand he went straight to the mass of the people in the market place and held open air meetings. He soon attracted the attention of the philosophers who ridiculed his message but were open to hear more. To the academics he still preached the same simple message of 'Jesus and the resurrection'.(17:18)

The two dominant schools of thought in those days were the Epicureans who believed life was only in this world and that we should enjoy its pleasures to the full; the Stoics on the other hand believed that there was life after death in which we would be rewarded if we behaved ourselves now. These two groups were the equivalent of the Sadducees and the Pharisees in their opposing views of life.

Paul's message used three initial approaches. Firstly he showed them their inner hunger for God as revealed by the altar to the unknown God. Secondly he used the knowledge of God in creation which He has put into all of us.(Rom.1:19,20) Thirdly he drew on the words of their poets, the pop song writers of their day, where they had stumbled on fragments of the truth. All three approaches are just as relevant today in our heathen superstitious society. Finally he returned to his opening theme, Jesus and the resurrection, and our need of repentance if we are to escape the judgement of God. Paul did not quote the Bible at Athens because they were ignorant of the scriptures and to do so would have been a waste of words. Neither on the other hand did he play their intellectual game. His message was simple, faithful to the gospel and totally appropriate for his hearers.(17:19-31)

As usual there was a mixed response. Some said 'no', some said 'may be' and some said 'yes' including Dionysius, one of the philosophers.(17:32-34)

Corinth, less than 100 miles away, was another world needing a radically different approach.

18:1-3 Q.1 Of all the families with whom Paul might have boarded why were Aquila and Priscilla so appropriate? What effect did Paul's witness have on them? Why as a missionary did Paul work with his hands? Should he not have trusted God to supply his financial needs? How was Paul's first foothold in Corinth so suitable for a busy commercial centre? What can we learn from his approach if we live in a big city?

18:4 Q.2 With what activity did Paul balance his infiltration of the business world of Corinth? How in this balance is there a similarity between his approach in Athens and Corinth? How might this also be relevant for us today?

18:5,6 Q.3 When did Paul decide to give up working from within the synagogue? Had his time there been a waste? What did Paul mean by 'your blood be upon your own heads'?(II Sam.1:16; I Kgs.2:32; Ezek.18:13; 33:4,6,8; Matt.27:25) When should we give up on someone who will not listen, and move on?

18:7,8 Q.4 What fruit was there from Paul's ministry in the synagogue? Where did the church meet in Corinth? What indication does this section give us of what is necessary if a city church in particular is to be strong?

18:9-11 Q.5 In what way does God give us today the kind of assurance He gave Paul about the future of his ministry? Why does He do it? How was it that the Corinthian Christians could have got into so much trouble in the couple of years from the time of Paul's visit there until he wrote I Corinthians, considering that they had had a whole 18 months of his teaching?

18:12-17 Q.6 Many people finding Christ was eventually followed by reaction as so often before. What charge was brought this time? Compare it with 16:20,21; 17:7. Are such claims true? How did Gallio's response illustrate Rom.13:1-7? The Jews beat up their spokesman. What eventually happened to him? (I Cor.1:1)

18:18 Q.7 Trace Priscilla and Aquila's movements through the New Testament. (18:2,26; I Cor.16:19; Rom.16:3-5; II Tim.4:19) What was their special ministry? Why were they planted in Ephesus ahead of Paul's own visit there?

18:19-21 Q.8 Why did Paul make such a short visit to Ephesus when the Jews were actually asking him to stay longer? What was God doing to prepare for Paul's eventual visit at the right time? What can we learn from this story about the will of God in our lives?

18:22,23 Q.9 What did God have for Paul to do before his long stay in Ephesus? Why were these things so important? What does this teach us about God's strategy in establishing His church?

18:24-28 Q.10 What did Apollos know about the gospel? What did his ministry lack? What difference did it make when he found out what he did not know? What can we learn from the way Priscilla and Aquila approached helping him? What mistakes do we commonly make in this kind of situation?