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### **EVANGELISM (Part 2)**

By David Phillips

In the previous issue we looked at the first spreading of the gospel in Thessalonica as witnessed in Acts chapter 17 and Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. We considered what evangelism is, what the evangel is and what should be our motivation. In this second part we will consider Paul's method in evangelism and the cost of the gospel.

#### **Paul's method.**

We cannot know for sure if the Apostle Paul had a clear evangelistic strategy and yet there are certain features to the way he set about the task that present themselves to us in the New Testament and in Thessalonica.

#### **Obedience**

The first thing to remember about the work in Thessalonica is that Paul had not intended to be there. Luke tells us in Acts 16 that he had a different plan: "when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them." (v6&7). The first and most obvious part of Paul's evangelistic method was obedience – to get on and do what he had been told. They had not intended to go to Thessalonica, they had intended to preach the gospel in Asia minor.

The book of Acts suggests that the early Church was not as quick to do this as we might think. Jesus told the apostles to be His witnesses "in all Judea, in Samaria and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1.8). When the Spirit had come on them they set about this task with vigour – but only in Jerusalem. Certainly some of the pilgrims who were converted at Pentecost will have taken the gospel home with them, but until chapter 8 the gospel work was only being done in Jerusalem. They seem to have been reluctant to obey until God acted to force them to get on with it. After the martyrdom of Stephen we are told "a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles." (Acts 8.1). What did those who were scattered do? "Those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word" (Acts 8.4). Notice here that there is no excuse for the idea that spreading the gospel is the preserve of a few – the command had been given only to the apostles but everyone was scattered and those who were scattered proclaimed the word – all of them it appears.

All of us who are followers of Christ are to be obedient to this command, to be witnesses to Christ even to the ends of the earth. If we abandon that task then we invite the Lord to force us to it through persecution.

#### **Openness**

Paul and his companions were being obedient to the command but the Holy Spirit seemed to be frustrating their plans. It was whilst they were being obedient that they were guided. They were not sitting around waiting for guidance because they had already been given the guidance they needed – to be his witnesses. But when the Lord called them to Macedonia they were open and ready to go, first to Philippi and then to Thessalonica.

It can be hard when we have our cherished plans to be attentive to the Lord's leading particularly if our original plan seems to be of the Lord. There was nothing wrong with what Paul and co. were planning to do in Asia minor, they were being faithful, the need was certainly there, but the Lord

had another plan. You will recall that Paul also had a long term plan to preach the gospel in Spain but as far as we know he never succeeded. It was a good plan, a godly plan, but it was not God's plan and He had to be prepared to let that go, just as he had to be prepared to go to Macedonia when the call came.

The question of how they came to be in Thessalonica is not so clear. They went first to Philippi which was logical but when they were chased out of Philippi why did they go to Thessalonica? It was a 90 mile walk to Thessalonica and on the way they would have passed through two other decent sized cities. It is possible that they stopped and Luke didn't record it. It is possible also that they went some distance to avoid the possibility, as happened when they next moved, of opponents travelling from one city to another to stir up trouble. It is also possible that they knew that there was a fair sized Jewish population in Thessalonica.

### **Wisdom**

If there is one thing that is most obvious in Paul's evangelistic strategy it seems to be that he started with the Jews. This is curious since Paul had been called to be the apostle to the gentiles, but he seems to have felt there was some degree of necessity to preach the gospel first to the Jews and only as this met opposition to turn to the Gentiles. If there was theological motivation for the strategy it also made sense humanly speaking. All the background of religious understanding, expectation of the messiah and the shared culture would make it a lot easier for Paul to speak to Jews. Moreover, because of his own position he could gain a hearing in a synagogue as happened at Thessalonica. Acts 17 also mentions devout Greeks, that is gentiles who respected the high moral teaching of Judaism, and probably its worship but who had not become proselytes. Again there was more common ground with such people. And then there were some prominent women of the city, not dissimilar to what happened with Lydia in Philippi.

This early church in Thessalonica was not very culturally diverse, certainly not compared to the impression we get of some other churches. Nevertheless, we have to admit that it is easier to evangelise amongst people who are similar to us or to one another. Starting congregations in middle-class areas, amongst young suburban families, or specifically geared to teenagers is easier, but the danger comes when we stop there. Indeed a church where everyone is similar, whatever that similarity might be, is going to find it much harder to fulfil its calling to witness to all. Nevertheless, the Apostle Paul does seem to have started his evangelistic efforts with those most likely to be receptive – and then quickly moved on.

Luke implies that Paul only had three weeks in Thessalonica. Some think that Paul's comment in 1 Thessalonians about labouring so as not to burden them implies a longer stay but we cannot be certain. The rapid progress of the gospel in the city is remarkable and although Paul had to leave them after only a short time his letters, whilst showing concern, also indicate a church where the gospel had taken a firm hold.

### **The cost of the gospel**

The gospel is of grace, the free gift of God. And yet, the gospel comes at a great cost – not to the receiver, but to the giver. Paul and co. had been forced out of Philippi and "spitefully treated". When they got to Thessalonica things were not much easier, there was "much conflict" (1 Thess 2.1) to the extent that when they moved on people followed them to stir up more trouble. Moreover, he laboured night and day not just to spread the gospel but so that they would not be a burden to the believers.

Why would anyone want to undertake such a work and bear such a cost if we are offering the gospel freely? Because this is itself part of the gospel, it is free to us because the cost has been borne not by us but by Christ in His incarnation, suffering and death. It has come to us freely, and

recognising that we should, in gratitude, want others to hear this same message, but in the providence and purposes of God that will come at a cost to us.

It may be as we share the gospel we have to bear the cost that others think us fools – but this was a cost Christ bore for us. It will cost us our time, our energy, our riches – but this was a cost Christ bore for us. It may be that it will cost us our lives – but this was a cost Christ bore for us.

The gospel is the power of God unto salvation, but a willing messenger also embodies the gospel and by bearing this cost becomes a powerful witness to the greater cost Christ bore for us.

*By the editor, David Phillips (General Secretary of Church Society)*