

The Trouble With Paul



Acts 16:20 "When (the owners of the girl with the spirit of divination) had brought (Paul and Silas) before the magistrates, they said, 'These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and (they) are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.' The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, (the magistrates) threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, (the jailer) put (Paul and Silas) in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks."

Unfortunately, the author of the Book of Acts does not tell the reader exactly what customs Paul and Silas were advocating

that was so disturbing to the crowd or unlawful for citizens of Rome to adopt or observe. Surely it has to be something more than simply loving your neighbor as yourself, or feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and caring for the sick and imprisoned, as Jesus encouraged his followers to do. So, what was it? What were Paul and Silas advocating? Over the last few weeks, I have been preaching about the radical equality that Paul promoted in the 3rd chapter of Galatians (3.27-28), where followers of Jesus were encouraged to make no distinction between Jew and Greek, between male and female, and between slave and master, in a Jewish and Roman culture which did make distinctions. Was that it then?

Paul is often seen as the great evangelist spreading the Gospel throughout Asia Minor, and now into Greece and Europe, establishing new congregations, later writing letters to them that will become part of our Scriptures, and proffering the theological understandings of his day, but there is another side to the story that is often overlooked, that is, the constant violence that followed Paul wherever he went, as clearly recorded in the Book of Acts again and again. I know of no other early preacher in the church who had such a consistent pattern of fierce opposition, not just vocal religious disputes and theological arguments, but outright physical violence. Perhaps it is important to note that Paul first appears in the

Scriptures at the violent stoning of St. Stephen, the church's first martyr, where the attackers laid their coats at feet of a young Paul, with the Scriptures specifically noting that Paul was consenting to the death of Stephen (Acts 8.1). Next Paul appears as a fierce persecutor of the church, breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, with letters from the High Priest to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if Paul found any Christians, he might bring them bound in chains back to Jerusalem, men and women alike (Acts 9.1). Then came Paul's 'Road to Damascus experience', whereupon he was converted to Christianity, but violence continued to follow Paul. When he began to speak up in the synagogue at Damascus about his newfound faith, some plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Paul, so his disciples took him by night and lowered him in a basket over the city wall, so as to escape their wrath (Acts 9.24).

Paul is next seen going to Jerusalem to meet with some of the Apostles, but they were all afraid of him (9.26). So, Barnabas had to escort Paul in and testify on his behalf (Acts 9.27). Thereafter Paul began 'speaking boldly' with the Hellenists in Jerusalem, and again, his opponents determined to kill him, but when others learned of it, they brought Paul down to Caesarea and then sent him back home to Tarsus (Acts 9.30).

Barnabas later went to Tarsus and invited Paul to Antioch to help with the thriving church there (Acts 11.25). And that congregation famously then sent Paul and Barnabas out on their so-called First Great Missionary Journey, to spread the Word of God (Acts 13.2). They sailed to Cyprus where Paul blinded a 'false prophet' who was trying to turn the local governor against him (Acts 13.11), and then the group sailed onto Asia Minor.

At Antioch of Pisidia (not the Antioch earlier mentioned in Syria), the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, and stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their region (Acts 13.50). So, these two Christian missionaries shook the dust off their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium.

There they remained for a long time, we are told, speaking boldly for the Lord. But the residents of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles. And when an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to stone Paul and Barnabas, the apostles learned of it, and they fled to Lystra (Acts 14.5).

At Lystra, the Jews came there from Antioch of Pisidia and Iconium and won over the crowds, who then stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead, but alas he was still alive (Acts 14.19). The next day Paul went on

with Barnabas to Derbe and then soon thereafter sailed back to Antioch in Syria, where they had begun. So ended the First Great Missionary Journey.

After the Apostolic Council in Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas decided to go back and see how the congregations they started were doing, the so-called Second Great Missionary Journey. But Paul and Barnabas disputed with one another over whether to include John Mark again in their party, who had abandoned the first trip shortly after landing in Asia Minor. The disagreement between Paul and Barnabas became so sharp that they parted company (Acts 15.39); Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, while Paul chose Silas and set out overland to Asia Minor. It was on this trip that Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia calling him to come over to what we call Greece today.

They crossed over to the Roman colony of Philippi, and on the sabbath went not to the local synagogue surprisingly, but joined some women praying outside the city gate. There they formed a house church at the home of St. Lydia, the seller of purple. Here in Philippi, Paul also healed the slave girl who had a spirit of divination, whereupon her owner dragged Paul and Silas before the magistrate, who had them beaten with rods, and imprisoned (Acts 16.23), where there was that famous earthquake in the jail, and Paul ended up converting the Philippian jailor

and his family. Soon thereafter the authorities asked them to leave town (Acts 16.39).

Next, they traveled to Thessalonica, where Paul taught in the synagogue. Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and a few of the leading women. But the Jews became jealous, we are told, and with the help of some ruffians in the marketplace, they formed a mob and set the city in an uproar (Acts 17.5). While the mob was searching for Paul and Silas to bring them out to the assembly, they attacked Jason's house, where they thought he was staying. They dragged Jason and some other disciples before the city authorities, shouting, "These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also."

That very night the disciples sent Paul and Silas off to Beroea. But when the Jews of Thessalonica learned that Paul was there, they came to stir up and incite the crowds (Acts 17.12). Then the disciples immediately sent Paul away to the coast. Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, receiving instructions then to have Silas and Timothy join him there as soon as possible. So, Paul argued there in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace. Soon the crowd there brought Paul before the Areopagus, a religious tribunal (Acts 17.19). When they heard Paul speak of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed, others believed,

like the famous St. Dionysius the Areopagite. So, the tribunal ordered Paul to come back the next day and explain further. That night, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth (Acts 18.1).

There Paul would argue in the synagogue every sabbath and would try to convince Jews and Greeks. When they opposed and reviled him, Paul in protest said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! From now on I will go to the gentiles." Then he left the synagogue and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God; whose house happened to be next door to the synagogue, where Paul stayed for a year and a half. But the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the Gallio the proconsul, who dismissed the case a matter of questions about words and names and Jewish law. Then the crowd angrily seized Sosthenes, an official of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal (Acts 18.17).

Paul eventually moved on to Ephesus and about that time, no little disturbance broke out concerning the followers of Paul (Acts 19.23). A man named Demetrius, a silversmith who made silver shrines and brought much business to the artisans, whom he gathered together, said, "Men, you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost the whole of Asia this Paul has persuaded and drawn away a considerable number of people by saying that gods made with hands are not gods. And there is danger now to this trade of ours, much like the owner of the

slave girl with the spirit of divination in Philippi. When the artisans heard this, they were enraged and the city was filled with the confusion, and people rushed together to the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's travel companions. Paul wished to go into the crowd, but the disciples would not let him. After the uproar had ceased, Paul left for Jerusalem.

There, the Jews from Asia, who saw Paul in the temple of Jerusalem, stirred up the whole crowd (Acts 21.27). They seized him, and all the city was aroused, and the people rushed together, as they dragged him out of the temple. While they were trying to kill him, word came to the tribune of the temple police that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. Immediately soldiers and centurions ran down to them and when the crowd saw them coming, they stopped beating Paul. Then the tribune himself came, arrested Paul, and ordered him to be bound by two chains; he inquired who he was and what he had done. Some in the crowd shouted one thing, some another, and as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered Paul to be brought into the barracks (Acts 21.35). When Paul came to the steps of the barracks, the violence of the mob was so great that he had to be carried by the soldiers. The crowd that followed kept shouting, "Away with him!" The next day Paul was brought before the whole Jewish council, where there was division about Paul's teaching

about the resurrection. When the dissension became violent, the tribune, fearing that they would tear Paul into pieces, ordered the soldiers to go down, take him by force, and bring him into the barracks again (Acts 23.6). In the morning a group of forty Jews joined in a conspiracy to kill Paul. They went to the chief priests and elders and said, "We have strictly bound ourselves by an oath to taste no food until we have killed Paul. Now then, you and the council must notify the tribune to bring him (back) down to you, on the pretext that you want to make a more thorough examination of his case. And we are ready to do away with him before he arrives." But the son of Paul's sister heard about the ambush, so he went and told Paul, and for his safety Paul was moved to the palace at Caesarea (Acts 23.23). Finally, a group appealed to Festus the Procurator and requested that Paul be transferred back to Jerusalem. They were, in fact, planning another ambush to kill him along the way, so Paul, as a Roman citizen, appealed to the emperor himself. That appeal resulted in Paul being sent instead to Rome for judgment, where at the end of the Book of Acts, Paul was described as living by himself in Rome, under house arrest, with a soldier guarding him, while awaiting his trial (Acts 28,16)). Sometime later, according to tradition, the Emperor Nero is said to have ruled against Paul, and he was beheaded in Rome, thus ending the constant stream of violence that followed Paul wherever he went.

But what exactly was the cause of all this violence? Was it simply a dispute about the claims of the resurrection or Jesus being the Messiah? For surely there were other followers of Jesus making those claims too. Was it social unrest caused by a theology of radical equality between Jew and Greek, male and female, and slave and master, so contrary to Jewish and Roman customs of that time? Perhaps. And what was Paul's reaction to all of this violence? Was it radical nonviolence, like Jesus commended in turning the other cheek and loving our enemies? We don't know exactly, and this is our current discussion in the Friday Adult Bible Study. So come join us if you are interested. Amen.