

ACTS 19-21

Paul undertakes his third and final missionary journey.

1) At Ephesus he deals with some of the disciples of John the Baptist. Evidently the sect of the Baptist continued well into the 2nd century AD, but eventually became absorbed into Christianity (the Way). Being baptized into Christ, receiving the Holy Spirit, entering into the fellowship of the church (the body of Christ), is all part of what it means to become a “Christian.” The “kingdom of God” is about the future reign of Christ on earth as Lord (the second coming), but also, a partial instalment of that experience with the gift of the Holy Spirit today. The joy, hope, strength, perseverance, clarity, and growth of spirit experienced by believers is a sign of the Spirit’s working in life, in the midst of a world full of anxiety, fear, rage and despair. And further, through the Spirit, the risen Christ is living and acting through us today. For all our brokenness and inadequacy, through grace (the divine gift of love) we are ever becoming his hands, feet, voice and heart in the world.

2) Paul preaches in the synagogue, but then, also on Gentile turf (the lecture halls of “Tyrannus” - some philosophy teacher of the times). There is a lot of magic and superstition in Ephesus and a thriving business in selling statues and trinkets. Paul and the new faith are a threat to all that. People react in different ways - from giving up their superstitions to reacting defensively and angrily.

There is a riot in Ephesus instigated by Demetrius, threatened as he is in his commercial enterprise of selling figurines and promoting belief in the gods. Alexander is a local spokesman among Jews and his aim is to distinguish Christians from other Jews and to have the Christians condemned. The fear is that Paul and his associates will be connected to the Jewish faith, all Jews painted by the same brush and then persecuted accordingly. The town clerk breaks up the disturbance, this time.

Jews as Jews were allowed certain freedoms in their religious beliefs and practices (not having to participate in Roman religious festivals, emperor worship and refraining from other practices contrary to their faith). For a while, Christians were permitted the same freedoms because they were all Jews. Once gentiles come into the faith and are mixing with Jews, they enter a no man’s land. Jews want to disassociate from them because they threaten the purity of Judaism with their faith in Jesus as Messiah and their relaxing of Jewish purity laws. But this then makes Christians (as non-Jews) vulnerable to being seen as disloyal to the empire by refusing to participate in emperor worship and religious rituals. Paul is the enemy of purist Jews, being seen as a corrupter of the faith and a therefore a traitor to his people. But he is also seen as a disturber within the gentile world for undermining loyalty to the empire with his proclamation of Jesus as Lord (versus Caesar as Lord).

Of course, Paul is trying to be strategic and careful, not inviting trouble. However, his gospel message cannot but lead to trouble as people are being drawn to the faith. Imagine if Jesus as Lord is spreading his empire through the growing numbers of followers becoming his hands, feet, voice and heart within the same world the empire seeks to conquer and control! Imagine how his love and compassion, his repentance, forgiveness and gift of his Spirit challenges a society built on fear, class and race distinctions, power, wealth, violent conquest and suppression of all dissent?

3) In Chap. 20, Paul is visiting with believers at Troas. The meeting goes all night and it involves a mix of worship, conversation, discussion, teaching and Holy Communion. The way Holy Communion is done, interestingly enough, is around a common meal. By blessing it in Christ's name and eating together as a fellowship of Christ, it becomes a sacramental celebration.

4) Paul makes a farewell speech to the Ephesian elders, knowing that he probably won't see them again. As elders he encourages them to keep watch over the flock which the Holy Spirit has given them to tend. Paul anticipates that there will be persecution from without and conflict from within, and he links his persecution and theirs with conformity to the way of Jesus – through death to resurrection. He also believes that there will be false teachers who will come to confuse and mislead the flock.

His words to them also gives us a clue as to the thrust of his preaching to Jews and non-Jews. To the non-Jews he emphasizes "repentance toward God." To the Jews the message is "faith toward our Lord Jesus" as the Messiah. (20:21) Different people, different backgrounds and different experiences require different approaches to the same gospel. The love of God is revealed and embodied in the life and death of Jesus. His resurrection is God's vindication and confirmation of him as Messiah, and divine forgiveness along with the gift of the Holy Spirit are experienced in his name.

5) Paul is on his way to Jerusalem and everyone who cares about him is afraid of what will happen to him there. Why is he going? In his letters he talks about a collection from all the gentile churches in order to help the Jerusalem church which is terribly poor. He also hopes that by doing this, he will help build a bridge between Jews (Jerusalem Christians) and non-Jews (the churches of the Mediterranean and Asian world).

In Jerusalem, Paul, as feared, does not fare well. Even though James and the others try to get him to perform some public ritual at the temple, indicating his continuing loyalty to Jewish religion, many who are intent on stopping him instigate a riot. Paul is almost killed. The Roman guard breaks up the riot in time to save Paul, but they also imprison him until they sort out what to do next. In spite of James' attempt to build up Paul's flawed reputation among Jews and Jewish Christians, there is a significant group among Jews (and we must presume among Jewish

Christians, for they are also mentioned in harsh terms in Paul's letters) who are not supportive of his ways among gentile converts. They believe Paul has watered down the gospel and betrayed its Jewish roots, forever distorting it. This conflict will continue to hound Paul all the way through his ministry.