

The Great Stories of the Early Church
61-Paul and Silas 12
His Spirit Was Stirred
Acts 17:13-17

- 13 But when the Jews of Thessalonica had knowledge that the word of God was preached of Paul at Berea, they came thither also, and stirred up the people.
- 14 And then immediately the brethren sent away Paul to go as it were to the sea: but Silas and Timotheus abode there still.
- 15 And they that conducted Paul brought him unto Athens: and receiving a commandment unto Silas and Timotheus for to come to him with all speed, they departed.
- 16 Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry.
- 17 Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him. KJV

Introduction:

The city of Athens was at a goodly distance from Berea. Possibly it was thought to be far enough away to keep Paul safe from the vicious unbelieving Jews of Thessalonica who were not satisfied with merely having pushed Paul out of their town, they had followed him to Berea and caused enough trouble there that the disciples thought it proper to get Paul to safety.

It appears that Paul was left in Athens on his own, that is with no backup and no help if things turned ugly there as well. He sent for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible apparently first planning to just lay low until they arrived but he found that he could not. The city was in such a state of being given over to idolatry that he could not bear it.

The city was “full of idols;” there were busts of the popular god Hermes on every corner, statues and altars decorated the court-yard of every house, temples and porticos and colonnades, all presenting what was to him the same repulsive spectacle. What men for many years have considered art and beauty of form in the statues of Apollo, Aphrodite, and Mercury Paul saw as unveiled rebellion against God, a casting aside not only of the Person of God but of the natural instincts of purity that He had given.

Rom 1:24-27

- 24 Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves:
- 25 Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen.
- 26 For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature:
- 27 And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompence of their error which was meet. KJV

The ancient writers proudly boasted of that which was actually the shame of Athens, “there were more images in Athens than in all Greece besides;” and that “they worshipped the gods,” or expressed more piety to them “than all Greece:” and presently adds, as an evidence of their piety, that “they had altars erected to shame, fame, and desire;” and again, that “they exceeded all in their zeal for the gods.” Another said, “This city exceeds all others in worshipping and honouring the gods.” And again, “it had twice as many sacred festivals as any other city,” and, “It was easier to find a god than a man there.” They were open to anything new which would give Paul the opening to begin the proclamation of the gospel there.

But the question is, “what did Luke mean when he stated, that Paul’s spirit was stirred within him”? He did not tell us how it was stirred even though he did explain what his actions were, which give us something of a clue. There is not mistaking, though, that Luke’s choice of words tell us that there was a very strong and vehement reaction in Paul’s soul.

Different commentators over time have interpreted Paul’s attitude differently. Calvin would have us think that Paul grew very angry over the idolatry, a sort of an intense righteous anger.

“Though Paul, whithersoever he came, did stoutly execute that function of teaching which he knew was enjoined with him, yet Luke showeth that he was more incensed and moved at Athens, because he saw idolatry reign more there than in any other place for the most part. The whole world was then full of idols; the pure worship of God could be found nowhere; and there were everywhere innumerable monsters of superstitions, but Satan had made the city of Athens more mad than any other city, so that the people thereof were carried headlong with greater madness unto their wickedness and perverse rites. And this example is worth the noting, that the city, which was the mansion-house of wisdom, the fountain of all arts, the mother of humanity, did exceed all others in blindness and madness.” “Now, let us come unto Paul. Luke saith, forasmuch as he saw the city so given to idolatry, his spirit waxed hot, or was moved. Where he doth not attribute unto him indignation only, neither doth he only say that he was offended with that spectacle, but he expressed the unwonted heat of holy anger, which sharpened his zeal, so that he did address himself more fervently unto the work.”

But his actions would suggest a less angry but more profoundly concerned spirit within him. Corinth would also be a place where idolatry was wickedly rampant but Paul responded there with a self-sacrificing concern.

1 Cor 4:9-15

9 For I think that God hath set forth us the apostles last, as it were appointed to death: for we are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men.

10 We are fools for Christ's sake, but ye are wise in Christ; we are weak, but ye are strong; ye are honourable, but we are despised.

11 Even unto this present hour we both hunger, and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwellingplace;

12 And labour, working with our own hands: being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it:

13 Being defamed, we intreat: we are made as the filth of the world, and are the

offscouring of all things unto this day.

14 I write not these things to shame you, but as my beloved sons I warn you.

15 For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. KJV

It is extremely unlikely that Paul would react one way to idolatry at Athens and so very differently at Corinth. There is no doubt but that Luke's choice of words describes a very strong and intense internal agony on Paul's part but the likelihood that it describes anger is fairly small.

The needs of people drove Paul to prayer, agonizing and prolonged prayer, not blazing anger. He was stirred for sure and provoked very deeply, but it was with a heart anxious to see them delivered from their deceptions.

It is likely that he was frustrated with the Jews for not having born effective witness against the practices of the Athenians and it is likely that there was much compromise among them with the paganism of their city. Look at the words of Luke. "Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry. Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews..."

"His spirit was stirred...when he saw...idolatry...therefore disputed he in the synagogue."

I think that this is a quite appropriate place for us to consider how a Christian is to react when he finds himself surrounded by unbelief and false religion, because that is exactly where we are today. We think that because we see so many churches around us, especially in the South, that we are surrounded by Christianity but we are not. We are surrounded by Christianity gone wrong, Christianity that has abandoned its' roots and its' core theology, Christianity that has compromised with and in some place wholly absorbed the world, but we are not surrounded by historic Christianity. In fact, it is doubtful if we could find one Christian in 1000 in our communities that even has a coherent sense of what Christianity once was so as to be able to describe it.

That is really not a question. Our communities, just like Athens, are wholly given to idolatry. What do we do? What do we say? How do we react? Do we, as Calvin and some of the Reformers were ready to do, grow angry and start to violently resist the false religion around us? You may or may not know that John Calvin led in the burning of an Anabaptist at Geneva out of his sense of outrage at what the man was preaching. The 16th and 17th century history of Europe documents the persecution of tens and hundreds of thousands of Anabaptists by the Romanists as well as the Reformers. They were angry at what they considered the heresies of the Anabaptists... and some were, indeed, heretics...but not all even though all were persecuted.

The Church of England persecuted the Non-Conformists as well as the Baptists. Europe persecuted the Amish and the Quakers. These groups as well as others found their way to the New World to escape the torments being heaped on them by their home countries.

And many in our day are seeking to raise outrage against the errors of our time. Glenn Beck thinks that we as a culture are addicted to outrage and has written a book to make his point.

And, there have been times when religious outrage was proper and even sanctioned by God.

Judg 6:24-29

- 24 Then Gideon built an altar there unto the LORD, and called it Jehovah-shalom: unto this day it is yet in Ophrah of the Abi-ezrites.
- 25 And it came to pass the same night, that the LORD said unto him, Take thy father's young bullock, even the second bullock of seven years old, and throw down the altar of Baal that thy father hath, and cut down the grove that is by it:
- 26 And build an altar unto the LORD thy God upon the top of this rock, in the ordered place, and take the second bullock, and offer a burnt sacrifice with the wood of the grove which thou shalt cut down.
- 27 Then Gideon took ten men of his servants, and did as the LORD had said unto him: and so it was, because he feared his father's household, and the men of the city, that he could not do it by day, that he did it by night.
- 28 And when the men of the city arose early in the morning, behold, the altar of Baal was cast down, and the grove was cut down that was by it, and the second bullock was offered upon the altar that was built.
- 29 And they said one to another, Who hath done this thing? And when they inquired and asked, they said, Gideon the son of Joash hath done this thing. KJV

Gideon, at the command of God, pulled down the image of Baal and cut down the grove in which false gods were worshiped. This was a holy and righteous thing to do.

So, should Paul have purchased a sledge hammer and started down the street breaking idols and images because he was outraged at the idolatry? I would suggest that this would probably not have occurred to him. He knew that the idolatry was simply an outward demonstration of what had gone wrong in the hearts of the people and he also knew that breaking their idols would not change their hearts.

What did he do? Well, we have already referenced a little from his letters to the Corinthians but let us look further.

1 Cor 2:1-5

- 1 And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God.
- 2 For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.
- 3 And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling.
- 4 And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power:
- 5 That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. KJV

2 Cor 4:1-7

- 1 Therefore seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not;
- 2 But have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully; but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.
- 3 But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost:
- 4 In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them.
- 5 For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake.
- 6 For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.
- 7 But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us. KJV

2 Cor 11:3-9

- 3 But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.
- 4 For if he that cometh preacheth another Jesus, whom we have not preached, or if ye receive another spirit, which ye have not received, or another gospel, which ye have not accepted, ye might well bear with him.
- 5 For I suppose I was not a whit behind the very chiefest apostles.
- 6 But though I be rude in speech, yet not in knowledge; but we have been throughly made manifest among you in all things.
- 7 Have I committed an offence in abasing myself that ye might be exalted, because I have preached to you the gospel of God freely?
- 8 I robbed other churches, taking wages of them, to do you service.
- 9 And when I was present with you, and wanted, I was chargeable to no man: for that which was lacking to me the brethren which came from Macedonia supplied: and in all things I have kept myself from being burdensome unto you, and so will I keep myself. KJV

2 Cor 11:22-33

- 22 Are they Hebrews? so am I. Are they Israelites? so am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? so am I.
- 23 Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I am more; in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft.
- 24 Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one.
- 25 Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep;
- 26 In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren;
- 27 In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings

- often, in cold and nakedness.
- 28 Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches.
- 29 Who is weak, and I am not weak? who is offended, and I burn not?
- 30 If I must needs glory, I will glory of the things which concern mine infirmities.
- 31 The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is blessed for evermore, knoweth that I lie not.
- 32 In Damascus the governor under Aretas the king kept the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desirous to apprehend me:
- 33 And through a window in a basket was I let down by the wall, and escaped his hands.
- KJV

These are not the words of an angry man nor do they come from a heart where any part of the motivation is anger. This is indeed a man in whom the Spirit of God had firm control, a man in whom there was no quitting or turning back, but all of that flowed out of his love for the Lord and his concern for his fellow men.

In every city, every scenario, up to this point Paul has had a crew to help him, men to shield him and hide him if necessary, men to help him escape trouble if he needed to escape or to stand with him in it if that was required. But at Athens he has been left alone. He has no one and absolutely no protection.

But he was overwhelmed with concern. His spirit was violently wrenched when he witnessed the absolute dominance of idolatry at every turn. So, he put himself out in the public to bear witness to the truth which, of necessity, meant a confrontation of some kind with compromisers and idolators. With no backup at all he went into the synagogue to confront his countrymen concerning their weak witness against and compromises with the wickedness of the city.

We know that it has been the Jews themselves who have raised violent opposition to him both at Thessalonica as well as Berea and there was little reason to expect anything different from them here.

But we cannot and must not assume that Paul went in public with his message and did not give himself first to prayer. What does a spiritual man do when his heart, his very insides, are being emotionally torn out of him because of the evidences of the profound conditions he sees around him? He prays, he agonizes, he weeps, he pours his heart out to God on their behalf. Then and Only Then does he venture forth with the Word of God to present to those around him who are completely deceived. It was God Who called him to this work and it must be God Who goes with him to do the work. Anyone who thinks that Paul was merely riled up to the degree that he went out confronting people simply does not understand how this whole thing works.

So, torn and violently disturbed in his soul and having mightily besought God for His assistance, without backup or any help at all other than the Lord, Paul ventured into the Synagogue. But he did not go there timidly or with some kind of psychological ‘technique’ to ‘win friends and influence people.’ We have already read that Paul has forsworn all such nonsense.

Look again at his approach. “Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him.” The word that was translated ‘disputed’ is the root of the word from which we get ‘dialogue,’ but it was far stronger than the way that we normally see or hear it used. In modern language to ‘dialogue’ is to have a gentle back and forth discussion with someone but the way it was used by Luke suggests a strong and more argumentative tone.

Several of the modern versions, including the NAS, use the word ‘reasoned’ but that also seems a little weaker than Luke’s intention. The RSV has it this way.

Acts 17:17 So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the market place every day with those who chanced to be there. RSV

He opened a vigorous discussion and held solidly to his position, leaving no room for compromise or half-way measures. The Jews needed to see their folly at going easy on the idolatry, the ‘devout persons,’ the Gentiles who were accepting the scriptures as God’s Word, and anyone who was interested to meet with him in the market place heard the truth concerning the Deity of Heaven and the Deity Who is our Savior.

But again we see Paul taking advantage of what opportunities were there, not creating situations to be heard. The synagogue was a place which invited open discussions concerning the scriptures and invited visiting rabbis to speak.

The ‘marketplace’ was also an open forum. It was called the Agora and was an open square in the heart of the city. Around the sides of it stood public buildings, what we would call City Hall, courthouses, and temples of different gods as well as numerous shops. It was a place of buying and selling for people who brought their goods from the country to town. When business hours were over people gathered there to discuss all kinds of matters, particularly issues on which people had new ideas.

Acts 17:21

21 (For all the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing.) KJV

It was this very place where Socrates had spoken to individuals and groups to explain his philosophy. There Paul would have met Epicureans, Stoics and those of many other persuasions and thought. But the point is that it was a place where people met willingly and discussed openly ideas which related to philosophy and religion.

It is to our great poverty that we have no such places in our culture. Everything is so walled off and segmented that one must first pass through a vetting process before he has an opportunity to speak at public gatherings but then we go inside our homes and turn on a box where people have liberty literally to espouse any crazy idea, yet we have no opportunity to discuss anything with them.

Anyone who would present the gospel to the culture today finds most of the avenues which have

traditionally been open to people closed completely off. The cults have made people wary of folks ringing their doorbells. Television and radio are only for the wealthy, and the internet has become, for the most part, a place of insanity.

But... we should do what Paul did, see what Paul saw, and follow whenever we can his example. We should look around us and see with open eyes the real condition of our culture. We should perceive the danger to those caught up in it with hearts of real and genuine compassion for their souls. We should so walk with God that our hearts are wrenched like Paul's was and we should set ourselves to take every reasonable opportunity afforded us to speak to them about Christ.

The first hurdle to get across is caring enough to be bothered and to engage in faithful prayer. The second is to develop the willingness to speak when the opportunity exists or even gently create opportunities where there might be an openness to hear.

Our world, our culture, our county, our community is wholly given to idolatry. Dare we care in the same way that Paul cared?