

Telling the Story (Evangelism in the Early Church)

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And it came to pass, that, while Apollos was in Corinth, Paul having traveled through the upper country, came down to Ephesus, and found certain disciples: 2 and he said unto them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when ye believed?" (Acts 19:1-2).

Paul Returns to the Synagogue of Ephesus (19:1-10)

Paul's return trip to Ephesus was laborious, as all distant travel was in the first century Mediterranean world. The return trip to Ephesus from Antioch of Syria was over 1,500 miles. When Paul and his company came to Ephesus he found "certain disciples." The designation "disciple," as used for the followers of Jesus, is found in numerous occurrences in the Gospels and Acts (258 occurrences), but it disappears in the NT letters.

Mathates is an important term in first century usage. In fact, it is the earliest term used for the followers of Christ; especially, as reflected in Acts of Apostles. The word is "*mathates*" which was a part of a larger word-family. The initial meaning of the word is simply "*math*," which means "learning." A *mathetes* is one who learns. This is the Classical, *Koine'*, and Modern Greek meaning of the word. It was used for those who sat at the feet of Socrates in Athens, as well as all the philosophical teachers. The word *matheses* is the word for education and the word *mathematikos* is a scholar. This is the word used by Pythagoras (of the Pythagorean Theorem) for a scientist or in specifically applied sense, a mathematician. Learning was essential to being a disciple, which is something not know to the Christianity practiced in the 21st century.

As mentioned, outside of Acts of Apostles the term “disciple” is not found as a designation for the early Christians; especially is this so in the letters of Paul. Perhaps it was to eliminate confusion between the original twelve disciples and the later followers of Jesus. By the time the Gospels were written, “the disciples” was the most common designation for “the twelve.” Paul never refers to himself as a disciple; rather, he uses the term “apostle,” which would have been the equivalent of the *shaliach* of Hebrew tradition, an official representative of an authoritative body or person.

Perhaps, Paul didn't use the term in his letters because of the association of a *mathates* with him as their teacher or rabbi. The Jewish term for a disciple is “*talmid*,” who is always associated with a specific rabbi from whom he has received his teaching. Perhaps Paul did not want to create the impression that those being converted to Jesus were his own *talmidim* (disciples), since he was a rabbi. In his letters the terms used for the followers of Christ are: brethren, brothers and sisters (those of the family of God, 136 occurrences), believers (*hoi pisteuontes* – “the ones believing,” and various occurrences of the verb and noun in reference to believers, 66 occurrences), the most unique designation is “saints” (*hoi hagioi* – the holy ones), which Paul uses 40 times to speak of the followers of Jesus.

Into What Were You Baptized? (Acts 19:2b-7)

. . . and he said unto them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when ye believed?" And they said to him, "We have not heard of [the giving of] the Holy Spirit." So Paul asked, "Into what were you baptized?" They said, "Into John's baptism." 4 And Paul said, "John baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe in the one coming after him, that is, into [the name of] Jesus." 5 Hearing this they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. 6 And when Paul laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them; and they spoke with tongues, and were prophesying, 7 and there were in all about twelve men.

How Paul knew to ask this question would suggest some knowledge of John and what he was teaching. How these disciples of John the Baptist came to be in Ephesus is another good question. Add to this the fact that Apollos knew only the baptism of repentance proclaimed by John leaves one to wonder if he and these disciples of John were associated in some way. It does appear unusual that both had only a knowledge of the baptism of John, but it would not have been impossible if they had made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem during the time of the preaching of John, who preached baptism as an act of purification to make ready for the coming of the Messiah.

Even Josephus mentions the preaching of John the Baptist (*Antiquities of the Jews* 18.116-119), and portrays John in the imagery of Elijah, who, according to Malachi 3:1 and 4, would appear before the coming of the Messiah (cf. Mark 1:1-8; Luke 3:22-36). Great masses of Diaspora Jews came to Jerusalem for the pilgrim feasts, all of who could have heard John's preaching the baptism of repentance to prepare for the coming of the Messiah.

However these men came to be disciples of John, they none-the-less did not know of baptism in the name of Jesus. That Paul questions them concerning the reception of the Holy Spirit is curious. Does this mean that all persons baptized in the name of Jesus received the gift of empowerment of the Holy Spirit? What of Apollos? Why did he not receive the laying on of the apostle's hands?

There's also the question as to how Paul knew about John's baptism of repentance. Was he in Jerusalem during the time of John's preaching? Could this have been while he was there as a student of Gamaliel. Is it possible that Paul went out to hear John? How could Josephus have known who John was and Paul not know? There is no certain answers to these questions, but it is certain that Paul did know that the baptism with which those twelve men were baptized was not the baptism of new birth (John 3:3-5), or the baptism Jesus commanded his apostles to teach and practice (Matt 28:18-20).

Obviously, all baptisms are not the same. This is one of the most common errors within Christendom. Baptism in the name of

Jesus was immersion (the exclusive meaning of the Greek word for baptism), not sprinkling, which was form added in later centuries by church authorities other than the apostles. This is clear from this text, and other aspects of the baptism of Christ are found throughout Acts of Apostles (2:36-41; 8:36-39; and 22:14-16).

It is clear that Paul had to lay his hands upon these twelve men before they received the gift of the Holy Spirit, as was the case with Peter and John in Samaria (Acts 8:14-17). The apostles on Pentecost and Cornelius in Caesarea received this gift as a direct outpouring from God. Here in this case the gift was indirectly given through the laying on of the hands of an apostle, as was the case in Samaria (Acts 8:18-19).

Paul Returns to the Synagogue of Ephesus (19:8)

And having entered into the synagogue, he [Paul] spoke forcefully for over three months, reasoning and persuading them concerning the reign of God.

The scene, again, shifts to the synagogue of the Jews. Paul had been in Ephesus earlier and received a favorable reception (Acts 18:19-20); upon his return he was received again due to the interest he had aroused by his earlier proclamation that the Messiah had come and he knew his name. Now, those whose interest had been aroused wanted to hear more. Luke says that Paul spoke with boldness; further, Luke defines his speaking as reasoning (*dialegomai* - to discuss, discourse, reason with).

Paul was again in the synagogue “reasoning and persuading.” The Greek word for “persuading” here is the root of the Greek word for “belief.” Belief is not a leap into a subjective desire that something is true; rather, it is being persuaded and convinced as a result of truth. Paul’s case was rooted in the Scriptures, and that message was that the Messiah had come and his name was Jesus of Nazareth, his arguments were persuasive and as a result some of those that heard believed.

The content of Paul's teaching is identified as "the kingdom of God," or a more exact translation would read, "the reign or rule of God," The English word "kingdom" is not the primary translation for the Greek *basileia*. The coming of the *basileia tou theou* was closely associated with the messianic expectation. The last chapters of Isaiah present a promise that God would restore Israel to the homeland after which he would come into the world to deliver mankind from its self-destruction, which began with Adam.

The theme of God's concern with the self-destruction of the offspring of *ha adam* (the man) runs through Isaiah up to chapter 54, and then shifts from the sins of the people to the deliverance of God and the age that will follow Israel's restoration, understood by first century Judaism as the messianic age. This would be the time that the reign of God would have been restored in the affections of man. The rule of God is not his rule over the remnant of the saved, the church, it is his reign over heaven and earth and that reign would be ushered in by the Messiah with his resurrection from the dead (Matt 28:18-20)

Paul Lectures in the School of Tyrannus (19:9)

But when some, being obstinate and unpersuaded, were speaking evil of "the Way" before the multitude, he [Paul] withdrew from them, set the disciples apart, and was reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus (Acts 18:8-9)

Some heard Paul's words gladly, but some did not, as we see in verse 9. Those who were not persuaded were obstinate and unpersuaded. They not only rejected Paul's message they spoke evil of "the way." The word used to describe their behavior is (*kataloguntes*) literally means, "to speak abusively." Paul could see that their minds were closed.

So, Paul withdrew the disciples (i.e., those who had become messianic believers), and set them apart from the synagogue and took his seat in the school of Tyrannus. The word *schola* (school) is

the word for a gathering of those having the leisure to engage in discussion with those of common interest (i.e. they were free from work, the idle rich). The Greco-Roman world was filled with such places and the physical structures were often built by benefactors whose name was associated with the school. Tyrannus was very likely the person who built the lecture hall in which Paul took his seat (i.e. the seated posture of a sage or master teacher), with his disciples (students), seated in a circle or semi-circle, depending on the number of disciples assembled.

Paul here, most likely, engages in lecture or discourse with discussion and dialogue (*dialegomai*), which is the typical rabbinic method of teaching. This Greek word also communicates a very Greek activity, one for which the Greeks were famous. *Dialegomai* communicates the idea of reasoning or putting forth a line of argumentation in support of one's views. *Dialegomai* appears more in Acts of Apostles than all other writings of the New Testament. This word does not suggest a discussion associated with heated emotions; rather, it is a discussion among those who enjoy respectful discussions with peers; as with Socrates. If anger and irrational behavior were associated with the occasion, different words were used to describe it.

This opportunity provided Paul would have been much to his liking, in that it well suited the pattern of Paul's evangelistic method. When he went into a synagogue, as his custom was, the format of the synagogue service allowed a Jewish male the opportunity to speak or address the gathering; especially if there was some indication that he was a *rabbi*; perhaps a stripe of a distinctive color or particular tassels on his *tallit* or the prayer shawl worn by men covering their heads and shoulders when they read from the scrolls of the *Torah* or other books of Scripture, or when they prayed, as Paul mentions in 1 Cor 11:4.

When Paul was given the opportunity to speak, he would most probably have read from the Scriptures while standing, and then sat down to begin his interpretation of the text, which with Paul would have been a messianic texts. Following the reading and interpretation

he would have informed the listeners that the one about whom the text spoke had come and had been crucified by the Jewish hierarchy in Jerusalem. But God had raised him from death and lifted him up into heaven where he was seated at the right hand of God. At this point, a challenge would have likely come from the elders of the synagogue, and a consequent uproar would erupt. Those who welcomed Paul's words usually followed him out of the synagogue; usually the godfearers and some Jews who wanted to hear more. Typically, those who disagreed with him but could not refute him began a plot to get him out of their town.

Many Heard the Word of the Lord (19:10)

And this continued for over two years; so that many dwelling in Asia heard the word of the Lord.

As a rule, the believers continued to be associated with the synagogues, although their belief that Jesus was the Messiah distinguished them from the other members and possibly caused tension between them and fellow Jews. However, for Jews to have beliefs that distinguished them from one another was not unusual; Pharisees, Sadducees, and Zealots were associated together in the synagogues of Jerusalem and this is especially so of Diaspora Jews. Some were orthodox, with a total devotion to an oral *Torah* (the Traditions of the Elders) as well as the written *Torah*. Others those holding apocalyptic beliefs centering in a coming judgment of God as is seen in the collections of apocalyptic literature distributed throughout the Mediterranean world. Some Jews believed in angels and other heavenly deliverers (a son of man figure was a part of much of the intertestamental literature of the Jews). The Essenes held a belief in two Messiahs. The apocalyptic literature as is reflected in the book of Daniel, 1 Enoch, 2 Baruch, and 4 Ezra had been around for more than a hundred years; some Jews believed what was in them and some did not. There was not a strong orthodoxy within the Judaism of the first century; this is what caused so much consternation from the Pharisees. So, it is safe to say that much of the Judaism of the Diaspora was somewhat diverse.

Many of the Jews of the Diaspora were convinced that the Jerusalem hierarchy identified with the Temple and priesthood, was no longer expedient to the practice of Judaism, in that the greater majority of Jews lived outside of Palestine. This view prevailed following the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. The rabbis who survived the onslaught of Rome made their way to the coastal village of **Jamnia** or *Yavneh*; there they established an academy and reorganized Judaism with a central emphasis on the study of *Torah* in the place of animal sacrifices, the synagogue replaced the Temple, and the rabbis replaced the priests. These reformations have lasted to this day.

As stated earlier, the presence of diversity within the synagogues of the Diaspora was normal, but separating oneself from the synagogue was, in the eyes of the elders of the synagogue, an act of apostasy. Those Jews who followed Paul to the school of Tyrannus were subject to excommunication, if their separation was declared forbidden by the elders of the synagogue.

Most often those who separated themselves from the synagogue were gentile godfearers who were often large financial supporters of the synagogue; which was very possibly the principal motive for being allowed to enter the synagogue. This is very possibly the reason the leaders of the synagogues became so irate with Paul and attempted to stone him or drive him out of their town (cf. Luke 7:1-5; Acts 13:16, 43; 16:14; 17:4, 17; 18:4, 7; 19:10, 17). These godfearers usually made up that segment of converts who began to meet in houses along with the Hellenistic Jews who received Paul's message. These became what Paul would refer to in his letters as the *ekklesiai* (assemblies).

Paul's discourses usually created great interest and for more than two years his audiences grew in number, so much so that a great many people of Asia Minor heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks. The numbers mentioned here likely resulted from the fact that Ephesus was the largest city of Asia Minor, being the major trade center of Asia Minor. People coming to Ephesus would often have their interest aroused when they heard of prophet of Israel who

worked great miracles, who claimed that he was sent from God to herald the arrival of the kingdom or rule of God, and many believed that he was the Messiah.

Application

Here again, we arrive at the task of applying this material to the life of the disciples of Jesus of the twenty-first century. One would think that such a task would not be all that difficult; especially, since the culture we are a part of is not as violently opposed to the claim that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. However, most of those calling themselves Christians today do not have an adequate enough knowledge of the story of Jesus to feel comfortable discussing the story with others. One can almost hear the words of the prophet Hosea crying out God's warning to Israel, "My people are destroyed for a lack of knowledge," (Hosea 4:6).

The greatest story ever told is the greatest story never told according to Stephen Prothero, chairman of the Department of Religion at Boston University. In his book *Religious Literacy*, he laments the fact that American Christians are virtually illiterate in terms of Bible knowledge. Scripture is not lived out in the lives of the Christians of this century; in fact, it is not known well enough to inform one's thinking on most of the moral issues of our day.

The term "disciple" appears to have completely lost its meaning in the Christianity of our times. It is probably the case that most people calling themselves "disciples" have no idea of the meaning of that word. One is not a disciple of Christ unless he or she knows the story of redemption event that occurred in cross and empty tomb of Jesus of Nazareth, and because of their belief of this story have become students of the life and teachings of Jesus. One cannot make claim to discipleship and have only a shallow knowledge of who Jesus of Nazareth was and what his incarnation means to the human race. Sad to say, there are myriads that fall into this category. It is interesting to ask a person who professes to be a Christian if he or she is a disciple of Jesus. When they say they are and are asked how much of his teachings they know, they often say

either not much or none at all. When told that a disciple is a student who sits at the feet of his or her teacher and studies with him until that learn all he desires them to know, they often say that they guess they are not really disciples.

The idea of learning about Jesus or learning from him has been reduced to hearing a thirty-minute sermon on Sunday morning. The more devoted Christians may hear an AM and a PM sermon, and maybe attend a class before the sermon. What they learn from these token experiences is so little that if asked to repeat it, they would not be able to remember more than the jokes.

The example of making the most of opportunities we unexpectedly receive is well played out here in this text. Paul is given access to the school of Tyrannus, which provided him an excellent opportunity to teach and enlighten great numbers concerning the faith. It didn't just fall into his lap, he was given the opportunity because of what he had said and done in exemplifying his faith in this one he called his Lord. There are opportunities that present themselves to us, if we provide such an example of life that others will want to hear what we have to say about why we are who we are.

Of most significance to us in this study of evangelism in the early church is the example of "the pattern" of Paul evangelistic method, of going to those with whom he had the most in common to share his faith. For him, that was the synagogue. Because of the beliefs he had in common with the people he found there, he was able to relate to them, which is the meaning of the word "relationship." It is a well established fact that the greater majority of those converted to Christ were led to faith by someone with whom they had a good relationship, whether family, friends, or acquaintances.

Another application point here is the example of Paul's use of Scripture to affirm and confirm his faith. The content of what he believed was critical, not how deeply emotional he felt about it. People are often impressed by sincerity, but they are not converted by it. It is clear from every example we have of Paul's evangelistic

endeavors that it was the content of his message that was of greatest importance. What he said in all of his reasoning from the Scriptures concerned the identity of Jesus. This was the core issue for him, not others matters of faith, whether ritual, theological, or moral issues. If Jesus is accepted as Lord, then these matters resolve themselves. One cannot have Jesus as Savior unless he or she is willing to truly acknowledge him "as Lord." If he is truly the Lord of one's life, then his words and deeds are the model of what our words and deeds must be. If we confess him as Lord, the legitimacy of that confession is seen in our behavior. This is clear from his words of Luke 6:46, where he asks those who were professing to follow him, "Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and not do what I say?" Millions call him "Lord" but don't know what he said. Myriads want him as their Savior, but not many will have him as their Lord; not if it means doing what he said.

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