

Telling the Story (Evangelism in the Early Church)

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Paul stayed in Ephesus for two years teaching daily in the school of **Tyrannus** teaching the good news that the Messiah God had promised had come into the world. This teaching set the priests of the Temple of **Artimas** (the Roman Diana) into an uproar, as well as those who depended on the cult of **Artimas** for their livelihood, not to mention the Jews of the synagogue of Ephesus.

After a city wide rebellion erupted, Paul made his way out of the city, going through Macedonia, down into Greece in route to Corinth. During his stay in Ephesus he had received a letter from the church in Corinth with a list of questions of controversial issues. Paul responded with a letter (1 Corinthians), carried by Timothy. As Paul journeyed south through Macedonia, Titus met him and informed him of larger problems in the Corinthian church, which were associated with some who had come in among them calling themselves apostles challenging Paul's apostleship. Paul dispatched a second letter (2 Corinthians), and waited in Macedonia for a report on the church's response to his letter. He then made his way to Corinth to confront those who were trying to displace him and establish themselves as the true apostles of Christ. When he arrived in Corinth, he confronted the false apostles, which must have resulted in their expulsion in that Paul stayed with the church there three months. It was during this time Paul wrote his letter to the Romans.

He then began his last journey to Antioch of Syria and Jerusalem, the church from which he embarked on his three missionary journeys. He sailed east and came to Troas where he

waited until the first day of the week in order meet with the church at Troas, at which time he would partake of the Lord's Supper and deliver a discourse (Acts 20:5-12). He then set sail again and came to Miletus and summoned the elders of the church of Ephesus so that he may encouraged them and warn them concerning the dangers that would arise in the days ahead, from within and without. Now, we look at his address to the Ephesians elders, which may be considered a summary of his evangelistic activity while in Ephesus.

Paul Affirms His Faithfulness to His Ministry (Acts 20:18-21)

And when they came to him, he said to them, "You know from the first day that I set foot in Asia how I was with you the whole time, 19 serving the Lord with humility, with tears, and with trials which that occurred by the conspiracies of the Jews. 20 how I shrank not from declaring to you anything that was teaching you publicly, and from house to house, 21 testifying both to Jews and to Greeks repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus (Acts 20:17-21).

Paul's first matter of importance was to remind them of his manner of serving them as a servant of Christ, even in the face of conspiracies of the Jews to run him out of Ephesus.

Paul saw himself, first of all, as a "servant of God," a designation rooted in biblical tradition, being found throughout Psalms 119, and in the "servant songs" of Isaiah, chapters 42 through 53, to identify a figure who was a faithful servant of God. The term "servant" is used often by Paul in his letters to speak of himself (Rom 1:1; 2 Cor 4:5; Gal 1:10; Phil 1:1).

Paul held back nothing that would inform the faith of these elders and aid them in their work as shepherds of the flock at Ephesus. Here is an insight into the twofold method Paul used in his evangelistic activity and his edification of the saints: (1) he taught them from house to house in private teaching situations, and (2) he taught them publically. The "house to house" is readily understood

in that all churches of the first century were house churches. The reference to his teaching publically most likely has reference to his teaching in the school of Tyrannus. Most of the conversion came through group discussions and reasoning from the Scriptures in the synagogues and with those (mainly godfearers), who followed him from the synagogue to group sessions where dialogue and discussion took place without interruption.

Paul sums up what he taught them as: (1) teaching repentance toward (*eis*-into) God and (2) faith toward (*eis* - into) our Lord [who is] Jesus; literally this reads, "faith in the Lord of us, Jesus." In 1 Thess 1:9-10, we see a similar address by Paul, which serves as an excellent interpretation of what Paul says here.

The world Paul uses to speak of his style of communication is *dia-marturomai*, which means "a thorough and solemn declaration." So, Paul took his message as a solemn declaration of revelation concerning the salvation God had sent into the world through Jesus.

Paul Knows What Will Happen in Jerusalem (Acts 20:22-24)

And now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that are going to happen to me there: 23 except that the Holy Spirit informs me in every city, saying that bonds and tribulation wait for me. 24 But I do not count my life of value to me, so that I may finish my course, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to bear witness to the gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20:22-24).

Paul had received a glimpse of what was to come. Bonds and tribulation (*thlipsis*) were waiting for him. Paul uses the same word Jesus used in Matthew 24:21-29; Mark 13:24; and John 16:33, in his warnings to the disciples of the tribulation they were to experience. It is also the word used by John in his vision of tribulation to come upon the saints (Rev 1:9; 9:10) and the great tribulation to come upon the earth (Rev 9:14). The word *thlipsis* is a word with an imagery associated with it. This was the word used in the first century

Mediterranean world for stomping grapes, which well communicates the meaning of what Paul saw coming for the church.

I Shrank Not from Declaring to You
the Whole Counsel of God
(Acts 20:25-27)

And now I know that all of you among whom I went about preaching the kingdom (the reign of God), shall see my face no more. 26 Therefore I testify unto you this day, that I am innocent of the blood of all [men]. 27 For I shrank not from declaring to you the whole counsel (boulēn -will) of God (Acts 20:25-27).

Paul's preaching of the kingdom of God may be understood in the sense it is found in his letters where it is to be understood as the reigning power of God rather than an earthly entity. The word translated kingdom is *baseleia*, which means to rule or reign as a ruler; and by extension it can mean the realm of that rule, but this is a secondary meaning and, unfortunately, the meaning it has been given from the fourth century when the Roman Emperor Constantine made the church a part of his kingdom. As the church became an entity of the Roman Empire the understanding that the church was a kingdom became more and more appropriate as the church was transformed into the official religion of the emperor. Curiously, Protestantism didn't question this understanding of the term and the essential meaning of *basileia tou theou*, as proclaimed by Jesus became lost in the translation.

Verse 26 is very curious; one cannot understand Paul's words here without knowing the tradition of "the watchers of Israel" taken from Ezekiel 3:16-21 and 33:10-24.

Warning of Things to Come
(Acts 20:28-31)

Take heed to yourselves, and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians (episkopos), to shepherd the church of the

Lord which he acquired (*perie-poi-e'o* - to receive possession of) with his own blood. 29 I know that after my departure savage wolves will enter into your midst, not sparing the flock; 30 and from among your own selves shall men arise, speaking erroneous (*diastrepsō*) things, to draw away the disciples after them. 31 Therefore watch, remembering that for three years I did not cease to admonish (*noutheteo* - to make the mind aware of) each of you night and day with tears (Acts 20:28-31).

"Take heed" is *prosecheo*, meaning "to give attention to, take care, give diligence [i.e. take your responsibilities seriously]," with reference to the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians (*episkopoi*), to shepherd (*poimainein* - to shepherd or tend a flock), the church of the Lord.

Luke Timothy Johnson's comments on the expression "the Holy Spirit has made you overseers" are insightful:

This is the only time Luke uses the term *episkopis* ("overseers, guardians, inspector"), although his use of *episkope* in 1:20 is suggestive in context. In the Hellenistic world, the term is used for a variety of social and political offices, including that of educator (Plato, *Laws* 795D). The office of the *mebaqqer* at Qumran seemed to have similar functions (1QS 6:12; 620; CD 9:18-19; 13:6). Paul mentions such officials (in the plural) together with the *diakonoi* in Phil 1:1. In 1 Tim 3:2 and Titus 1:7, the office of the *episkopos* is, as here, not sharply differentiated from that of the *presbuteros*. Certainly there is no hint here of the hierarchal ordering reflected in Ignatius of Antioch, *Ephesians* 4:1-2; *Trallians* 3:1. The NT passages closest to the present one are 1 Peter 2:25: "Turn now to the shepherd (*poimen*) and guardian (*episkopos*) of your souls." Attaching the office to the appointment of the Holy Spirit obviously has strongly legitimating effect (Luke-Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp 362-363).

This biblical scholar is a Roman Catholic who teaches NT at Candler School of Theology at Emory University. Such an

observation from one who was at one time a Catholic priest of the Benedictine order is a curiosity, in that the tradition of the Catholic Church sees the *epipkopos* to be a bishop who is distinguished in rank above his fellow elders and shepherds of the church. The role of the bishop a having higher rank than the other elders reflects the hierarchy mentioned in Ignatius (in the quote above) and other early "Church Fathers" rather than the NT.

In verse 17, Paul summoned the elders (*presbuteroi*) of the church of Ephesus, and in verse 28 Luke identifies them with the *episkipoi* (overseers or guardians) and also speaks of their responsibility of shepherding (*poimainein*, which in Latin is "to serve as a pastor"). Thus, the elders, the overseers, and the shepherds were one-and-the-same in the early church. Before the second century AD each congregation was an autonomous entity unto itself, governing itself from within with no outside authority exercising rule over it, with the single exception of the apostles of Christ.

This observation is affirmed by other scholars as well. Dr Marvin R. Vincent, in his highly esteemed volumes, *Word Studies in the NT*, makes the following comments on the role of overseers (*episkopous*).

Denoting the official function of the elders, but not in the later ecclesiastical sense of *bishops*, as implying an order distinct from *presbyters* or elders. The two terms are synonymous. The *elders*, by virtue of their office, were *overseers* (M. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, vol 1. p 561).

On the same text, Vincent's comments on the term translated "to feed (*poimainein*)," are worthy of note. "The word [*poimainein*], embraces more than feeding; signifying all that is included in the office of a shepherds: *tending*, or *shepherding* (Vincent, *Word Studies in the NT*, vol 1, p 562).

Concerning the readings, "the church of the Lord," some early manuscripts read, "the church of God." Both readings have equal manuscript attestation. The expression "church of the Lord," doesn't

appear anywhere else in the NT; the expression “the churches of Christ” appears in Rom 16:16. The “church of God” is found in 1 Cor 1:2; 10:32; 11:16, 22; 15:9; 2 Cor 1:1; Gal 1:13; 1 Thess 2:14; 2 Thess 1:4; 1 Tim 3:5, 15.

The best argument for “the church of the Lord” is that it is more in harmony with what follows, “which he purchased with his own blood.” The word most translations render as “purchase” is *peripoieo*, a compound of *peri*’ (to encircle or encompass) and *poie’o* (to make, create); hence, to make one’s own by encompassing or embracing, as is found in 1 Peter 2:9, a “peculiar” people, which gives much more meaning to what is being said here than the idea of buying or purchasing. In fact, the word used here is not the Greek word for “to purchase,” which is the word *ktema*, found in Matt 19:22; 10:22; Acts 1:18; 2:45 and 8:20. The idea here in this text is that the Lord of the church made it his own by dying for it and raising out of death to be in its midst as a life giving spirit (1 Cor 15:45), and the Savior of those who were being saved (Acts 2:47).

Final Words

And now I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up [oikodemeo - to build up [in Paul, through instruction and experience-MWL], and to give you the inheritance of all those that are made holy. 33 I have desired no man's silver, or gold, or apparel. 34 You yourselves know [ginosko - experiential knowledge] that my needs and those with me were served by my hands. 35 In all things I gave you an example [hupedeixa - to place in sight, cause to be seen, exemplify] so laboring that you ought to help the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that he himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." 36 And having said these things, he kneeled down with all of them and prayed. 37 And they all were weeping and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him, 38 sorrowing most of all for the words he had spoken, that they beheld his face no more. And they accompanied him on his way to the ship (Acts 20:32-38).

In Paul's final words he turns the elders over to, or entrusts them to God, in that he would no longer be there for them. They would have to entrust themselves to the presence of the Lord to be with them as he promised he would be with the twelve (John 14:15-21; 15:5-8; Matt 28:19-20).

Their trust must be to God and to his word of grace. The construction of these words in the Greek text can say more than is seen in the English translation. It reads literally, "to the word of the grace of him." The genitive here can be understood as an ablative; i.e. "to the word which is from his grace." This is the sense of what is being said. The word is capable of making them holy and opening the them up to the heritage await all who became holy as God is holy; i.e., to restore the image of God within them.

Application

This text is a summary of Paul's agenda in his evangelistic passion for telling God's story of the redemption of the human race. From Acts 9:19 to 20:12; we see a pattern in his method of spreading this story. The first step was to find people with whom he had common belief: (1) monotheism, (2) the belief that God had spoken to Israel through the Hebrew Scriptures, (3) a concept of the Messiah who was promised through the Scriptures, (4) the belief that God had revealed the identity of his Messiah in the Scriptures, (5) an openness to discussion and the exchange of ideas, and (6) a degree of reasonableness in demeanor and/or attitude with reference to the thinking of others.

There were opportunities for Paul to address others than those he specifically sought out, such as the proconsul Sergius Paulos on the Isle of Cyprus, those of Lystra who believed that Barnabas and Paul were Zeus and Hermes, who had reappeared on earth as in the myth of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (8:611-724), where Zeus and Hermes came down to earth in human form and went to the house of an elderly couple. In Athens he addressed the elders of the Areopagus, to whom he proclaimed the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man.

Paul's evangelistic strategy was to search out groups having the characteristics mentioned above and find a way of addressing these people. Perhaps, the most important observation is that the subject addressed in every opportunity he was given centered in the identity of Jesus of Nazareth, with exception of the Areopagus speech. The content and focus of all his sermons and discourses was christological, i.e., that Jesus of Nazareth was the longed for Messiah, and that he was the Messiah in a far more profound and wondrous sense than that of a restored earthly king of Israel.

His second step was to arouse the interest of those to whom he spoke through his announcement that the Messiah had come and through him God had redeemed the human race through a new act of creation. Paul's presentations always created a level of interest that led to further investigation. This usually consisted of reasoning from the Scriptures concerning the prophecies of the Messiah, which led those who were open to what he was revealing to a third step, "discovery," and from that discovery to salvation.

That which consistently created the interest necessary to lead to an investigation opportunity was his christology. Next to that of John, Paul's christology is the highest of the NT. In the proclamations of Paul, in his teaching, preaching, and in his letters, Jesus was the Messiah, the deliverer or savior sent from God, not just for the deliverance of Israel but also for the salvation of the world. Paul proclaimed Jesus as the Son of God, who was the very presence of God in our midst. However, the designation or title most used by Paul was the title "Lord," which in Hebrew was *Adonai*, the title used by the Jews as a substitute for the personal name of God, *Yahweh*. In the letters of Paul it became clear that of all the titles he ascribes to Jesus, the title Lord (*Kurios*) is the most frequent and apparently the most significant. This can be seen in Rom 10:9, where Paul instructs his readers, "if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved;" and in Phil 2:9-11, where he says concerning Jesus that,

*God also has highly exalted him and given him the name which is above every name, **10** that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, **11** and that every tongue should confess that **Jesus Christ is Lord**, to the glory of God the Father.*

In the teaching of Paul, in order to have Jesus as your Savior, you must be willing to accept him as your Lord. If he is not your Lord, he is not your Savior. This is a truth most of Christendom refuses to hear or acknowledge. Every person professing him or herself to be a Christian thinks of Jesus as their Savior, but those who have truly yielded their will to him as their Lord difficult be to find. I would love to be proven wrong is this observation.

Paul's concept of his ministry is found in 2 Cor 5:17-20,

*. . . if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old have passed away the new has come! **18** All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us **the ministry of reconciliation: 19** that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not reckoning men's transgressions against them, and he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.*

Paul's saw his ministry as that of God's storyteller, and the story with which he was entrusted was the God's story of the redemption of the human race. This is also the story for all those who have heard and embraced the story, and those are also the storytellers of God.

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