

18 August 2019

Inventing Church: The Cost
2 Corinthians 11:21b-30; Acts 19-28

The Apostle Paul was not one of Jesus' original disciples, and apparently that was important to some. People were always questioning his calling and authority, which put him in a no-win situation. If he didn't defend his authority, he looked like he was giving in, and if he did defend it, he looked like he was boasting. We come to one of those passages in 2 Corinthians 11, and in the process learn a little bit about what his ministry was like. We read from verse 21 through 30:

But whatever anyone dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that. ²²Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. ²³Are they ministers of Christ? I am talking like a madman—I am a better one: with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death. ²⁴Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; ²⁶on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; ²⁷in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. ²⁸And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches. ²⁹Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I am not indignant? ³⁰If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.

Up to this point in our journey through Acts, I have basically been just retelling the story as it appears, scene by scene, incident by incident. The last chapters are a little different from the rest of the book, though. They include long accounts of a few incidents in Paul's life, told with all the (probably unnecessary) detail of most eyewitness narratives. So today I'm going to summarize a little more broadly and, as we wrap up the book, draw at least a few conclusions.

We have traced Paul's first and second missionary journeys in detail. In the first, he toured through Asia – in the area now called Turkey – and in the second he crossed over to Europe and visited cities in Greece. Some Bibles provide a map of Paul's "Third Missionary Journey," too, but by this time it's hard to tell when one journey ends and another starts. The fact is, everywhere Paul went was a missionary journey. So the next time we see him he's gone to the major Asian city of Ephesus and taken up residence there. He would stay there for two years.

One thing Paul did in Ephesus was write letters to churches he had started. For instance, in Ephesus he wrote his first letter to the church in Corinth – the letter we call First Corinthians – and in that letter we see some of the growing pains that the early churches were experiencing. There was a leadership crisis, for instance. Paul and others were passing through, planting churches or working in them for a while, then moving on, sometimes without leaving adequate stable leadership. The Corinthian church was fractured into different groups each claiming loyalty to a different one temporary leader. There was Team Paul and Team Apollos and Team Peter, and so on. There was even one group that called themselves Team Jesus. They were great fun at parties. So Paul had to talk to them about not tearing up the church with petty rivalries.

Moreover, without stable leadership, some problems arose that might have been nipped in the bud otherwise. At one point Paul has to write Corinth saying, “No, your church member *can’t* have an affair with his stepmother. Dude, even the Romans think that’s gross!”

More fundamentally, there was a clash of cultures as the good news moved into Greece. For instance, in the earliest church there was a remarkable amount of gender equality. You remember Priscilla, who’d been part of the church planting team that started the church at Corinth, and Lydia, the successful businesswoman who gave the church at Philippi a stable beginning. Well, there’s more. At one point in the book, Paul stops to stay with Philip – remember him? The deacon? – and Philip’s four daughters who were all preachers. We read about other women who were deacons. Traditional Greek culture, though – then, as now – had an extremely patriarchal structure in which women were expected to shut up and stay in the background and wear veils over their heads as signs of their submissiveness. So, something of a difference between the cultures of the church and Greece. Well, for better or worse, Paul decided that it was more important not to alienate the dominant culture than to embrace the gifts of women, so he counseled the women of Corinth to shut up and stay in the background and wear veils. Maybe there was a short-term benefit to this compromise. Long-term, less so.

It was also probably in Ephesus that Paul wrote his letter to the Romans. Paul had never been to that church, but hoped to go, and so he sat down to write out the heart of his theology fully and simply and clearly. In Romans, he accomplished that, except for the part about simply and clearly, and no other writing has influenced the church’s theology more. Speaking for myself here, I wouldn’t mind if the Sermon on the Mount had been used a little more and the Book of Romans a little less, but that doesn’t change the fact that Romans is an inspired work of depth and power.

So Paul was having to deal with leadership and moral and doctrinal issues in the fledgling church. There was another new problem on the horizon, though. Christians had been persecuted from the beginning, but up to this point the persecution had come mostly from Jews who resented the new group claiming to have their Messiah. Now, as the church grew, there began to be persecution from Greeks as well. While Paul was in Ephesus, some Greeks began to resent the Christians. You see, Christians no longer purchased idols and went to worship at the Ephesian Temple of Artemis, and that was starting to affect the bottom line of the idol manufacturing lobby. So one idol-maker named Demetrius started a riot, and soon had a crowd chanting “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” some of them not even knowing what the issue was, but happy to join a mob calling someone unpatriotic for believing differently, sort of like the internet. The riot was quelled by a stern city clerk, and Paul – once again – was hustled out of town, but this incident was a harbinger of persecutions to come. At about this time, a new Roman emperor was coming to power, named Nero. Within a decade Nero would turn Christians into a scapegoat for every catastrophe and amuse himself by designing cruel forms of execution for them. Dark days lay ahead for the church.

But back to Paul. He traveled up into Macedonia, visiting Philippi and the churches there. He wanted to go on to Rome, but he had one side-trip he wanted to make first. There had been a crop failure in Judea, leading to famine, and Paul was collecting funds from the Gentile churches to help the hungry in Jerusalem. It was part disaster relief and part gesture: “Look, you Jewish Christians who are still uncomfortable with your Gentile brothers and sisters! Look what they’re doing for you.” Eventually Paul gathered enough and turned toward Jerusalem with his

collection. It's a strange journey, though. Everywhere he stopped, people urged him not to go to Jerusalem. The growing success of the church had made him public enemy number one to the Jewish leadership. Paul wouldn't listen and pressed on, but he knew the danger. When he preached in churches along the way, his sermons all sounded like farewell addresses.

(For one young man, named Eutychus, one of Paul's sermons almost *was* a farewell address. Paul had stopped off in Troas to meet with the church there. His ship sailed in the morning, so it was his last chance to preach to them, which he did. For hours. At midnight, Eutychus, who had been sitting on a windowsill of the upstairs room where Paul was preaching, fell asleep and toppled over into the street below. They all rushed downstairs, but he seemed to have survived the fall, so Paul took them back upstairs. "Now, where was I?" and continued preaching until dawn.)

Eventually Paul arrived in Jerusalem and went to meet with James and the Jerusalem leaders. They told Paul bluntly that he was in danger, and they hatched a plan to show the Jerusalemites that Paul was, in fact, a faithful, observant Jew. They had him shave his head – a sign that he had taken a vow – and go through the full rite of purification before entering the temple. Paul followed their instructions, but it was no good. As soon as he was recognized, there was a riot, and if a cohort of Roman soldiers hadn't appeared, he would have been beaten to death in the street. The soldiers took him into custody, and as far as we can tell from scripture Paul would never see freedom again.

Now Paul had a sort of secret weapon as he was arrested by Roman soldiers. Apparently his parents in Tarsus had obtained official Roman citizenship, which meant that he'd been born with that status. This was a big deal. In our nation, founded on the Enlightenment principle that all human beings have certain inalienable rights, we claim to offer equal protection under the law to all people, whether they are citizens or not. That's what we claim. But in the Roman Empire only Roman citizens had the right to due process and the right to face their accusers and, if necessary, to appeal directly to the emperor. Paul had already played the citizenship card once, back in the Roman jail at Philippi, and he wasted no time telling the Roman tribune that he was a citizen. It surely saved his life, because now the Romans couldn't just hand him over to the crowds and look the other way, as they had done with Stephen. They were obliged to protect a Roman. So, when the Jewish council showed up to press charges against Paul, they couldn't touch him.

Here's how much some hated Paul. When they couldn't use the legal system to get at him, some Jews planned an assassination. Hearing that Paul was to be transferred to the Roman prison in Caesarea, forty Jewish men planned to ambush the detail taking him to Caesarea, vowing that they would not eat or drink until they had killed Paul. Fortunately for Paul, he had a nephew in town who heard the plot and reported it to the Roman tribune. They took Paul to Caesarea in the middle of the night, leaving forty hungry assassins to consider their life choices.

For the next several years, Paul was in prison in Caesarea. There he had the opportunity to tell the good news to two different Roman governors and to the latest king in the line of Herods, but while he was well treated there, none of the Roman officials wanted to anger the Jewish leaders by setting him free. It may have been while he was in prison in Caesarea that he wrote the letters to the Ephesian and Colossian churches. Eventually, as the Jewish leaders continued trying to come up with charges against Paul that the Romans would actually care about, Paul used his citizenship rights again and appealed to Caesar. The governor put him a ship

to Rome. The story of that voyage to Rome is long and detailed, involving a storm and a shipwreck and some other adventures, but eventually Paul and his companions arrived in Rome to await his appeal there. The book of Acts ends with Paul in prison in Rome: *He lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.*

* * *

I have said before and will surely say again that one of the most amazing things about our Bible is that it has no heroic figures in it. There is a universal human tendency to turn founders of religions and nations and movements into saints who can do no wrong, models to be imitated in every way, but both the Old and New Testaments of our scriptures steadfastly resist that tendency. Our Bible presents its “heroes” – patriarchs, law givers, judges, kings, prophets, and apostles – as deeply flawed, selfish, arrogant, bad-tempered, and frequently sort of dim. Well, what the Bible as a whole does with human heroes the book of Acts and the letters of Paul do for the early church. This is no ideal community. This is a church that squabbles, nitpicks, and has outright fights. This is a church that hammers out weird compromises that end up doing more harm than good, gets sidetracked by personality cults, and that makes progress in faith only through a process of repeated blunders. There are Christian groups to this day – most of them calling themselves “Primitive” something-or-other – who set out to do everything exactly the way the early church did it. God help them.

But that’s the thing: God *does* help. With all its flaws, the early church had people in it who asked for God’s help and actually listened to God’s replies – even when, as often happened, those answers were the last thing they expected or wanted. And when people listen for God, God helps. Frankly, Christianity would have never survived the early church without God’s help. Nor will it survive the mess that we’ve made of the church in our own age without that help. Perhaps the most important lesson for us in the book of Acts is that that help is available. God likes it when we listen and will not let listening go to waste. The New Testament church screwed up at nearly every turn, but there were those moments when people prayed – Peter praying on a rooftop in Joppa, the Antioch teachers praying over Saul and Barnabas – when the Spirit of God broke through. That can happen again.

The church we encounter in Acts is not a model for us to slavishly imitate. Rather it is a fellow traveler we can take comfort from as we stumble over some of the same bumps in the road. But if we keep listening, God will see us through. The journey may not go as we had planned, but neither did the early church’s journey. Back in Acts 1:8, Jesus told his disciples “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” That sounds like a strategy plan, but the way it worked out was a little less neat. The apostles didn’t leave Jerusalem until persecution forced them out, they weren’t prepared when Philip took the good news to Samaria, and they had a meltdown when Paul took it to the Gentiles, but as the book ends, Paul arrives in the city of Rome, the center of the known world. Maybe Rome isn’t the “ends of the earth” but from Rome you could get there. And sure, Paul arrives in chains. Details, details. But he got there and, more importantly, the good news got there, and world was about to change forever.

A final word: Acts ends sort of abruptly, doesn't it? Paul arrives in Rome and spends two years in prison there, and then what? Is he released? Executed? We don't know. But we do know what was going through Paul's mind. From prison in Rome he wrote to the church in Philippi, always one of his favorite congregations, saying this: *I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear. . . It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.* (Philippians 1:12-14, 20-21). Thanks be to God.