

PAUL AT ATHENS

We track Jesus with utter seriousness because Jesus is the ultimate follower of God. (Jesus is also “Messiah”; Savior; Son of God; sent by God; the Incarnate One; etc. However, it is appropriate for us to remember that none of these titles are precision mathematical formulas. They point toward things Christians have come to believe about Jesus. But none of them reach what they point toward.) Jesus is “the WAY” for those of us who have come to believe in Him. And we want to follow Him into “the WAY” He opens up for us and invites us into. Some would add: If we do not follow Him, we miss the WAY or get continually sidetracked and drawn off of the WAY. We tumble and stumble over the words because the words won’t do it. Christianity is a WAY of walking, and cannot ever be fully comprehended by merely thinking or talking.

We pay attention to the Apostle Paul because he is the best early illustration we have of a follower of Jesus. Others may also have been great illustrations of followers of Jesus, but we don’t have very much information about them. Certainly not nearly as much information as we have about Paul. We might note also that the information we do have about Paul does not make us doubt his sincerity or his reputation. Essentially, the more we ponder the information we have about Paul, the more we realize that he is the quintessential follower of Jesus. Sometimes when we get more information about a person, it has the opposite effect. In any case, from the synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – we learn about Jesus before the Resurrection. From Paul’s letters and Acts – written by Luke but much of it telling us about Paul – we learn about Jesus after the Resurrection. Both are essential to us.

Perhaps you have never had the question, but from time to time people ask me, “Why are we spending so much time on the life of Paul? Why don’t we just stay with Jesus?” And sometimes this is not really a question but a statement, and sometimes even from disrespect or dislike of Paul. Nevertheless, the answer is easy and straightforward: We learn a lot about Jesus, His Holy Spirit, and the implications of His life and ministry in our world by paying attention to Paul. Paul’s struggles, choices, approaches, and purposes reveal a great deal about Jesus because Jesus is the focal point of Paul’s life. And yes, we can learn in

the same manner from others, like Peter. Mostly Peter adds dimensions to what it was like to follow Jesus *before* the Resurrection. Sadly we have only a few stories about Peter *after* the Resurrection. They are wonderful; they are just too few.

Real stories and real people help us to keep correcting our theories and careless assumptions. As we have all learned, it is easy for our theoretical thinking to take us into make-believe places – places we imagine would be an improvement to real life. The problem is, we cannot follow Jesus in theoretical ways or places. We follow Jesus in real life, or it is only a charade – only make-believe. A lot of Christianity is play-acting and make-believe. I don't think we intend to end up that way, but all of us have ended up there from time to time. It is easier to imagine ourselves being faithful than it is to *be* faithful. And if our theories and principles have gone out of focus – if what we are trying to emulate and be like is wrong in the first place – then what hope is there for us to stay on the Path? As you know, many people still keep the image in their heads that Christians should be nice, sweet, and kind to everybody all the time. The real story of Jesus shatters this popular myth. “*Woe to you scribes, Pharisees*” (Matthew 23:13-35) This to His adversaries. But under some circumstances, He can also be scathing to His best friends: “*Get thee behind me, Satan*” (Matthew 16:23; Mark 8:33)

Or again, one of the persistent messages we hear from the church in some quarters is the claim that “good Christians” will always be healed if they are faithful, and that true Christian leaders will have few problems or foibles of their own. But the real story does not corroborate. “*So to keep me from being too elated by the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from being too elated.*” (II Corinthians 12:7)

Paul had healed many others. Now it was his turn. Surely between his own faithfulness and the great mission he was engaged in, the Spirit would realize that this was indeed a fair and righteous request. It was a time to heal. But no! Three times Paul prays for healing. Then realizing his prayer is not being answered in the way he had hoped, he drops it. “*My grace is sufficient for you – my power is made perfect in weakness.*”

Not what we were hoping to hear, no matter how powerful and true the message. From then on, Paul is one of the top illustrations of a really faithful Christian who does not get healed or helped as any of us would think or suppose he should have been. And Paul does not turn

away from his faith or cut back on his purpose and ministry. He simply goes on – living around it, and through it, and beyond it. No other choice is open to him that he knows about.

From such incidents we also come to “cults” within the church that deify suffering – as if suffering itself is a worthy end, or “good for the soul,” or a blessing from God, or the aim or purpose of the Christian Faith. Sometimes we stay faithful despite our suffering, but suffering is not the aim or the goal of the Christian Life. (“It is better to be rich and healthy, than to be poor and sick.”) At least I really believe that. But I also believe that there are many situations, in this broken world, where healing – at least on our present level of development – is not appropriate or possible (without breaking the “Prime Directive,” God’s decision to never do anything that would destroy our free will). At such times, we need to make the sincere and earnest requests, but if no healing comes, we stay faithful and move beyond it, and through it, and around it. And without any residue of guilt, or feeling like God has abandoned us or found us unworthy. But you see, we learned this from watching Paul ... who is following Jesus.

So what about Paul in Athens? Am I ever going to get to that? I think this is another incident from which we can learn a lot by watching Paul.

What is the issue? What is at stake? Athens is one of the great learning centers of the world in Paul’s time. To make an impression and leave a Christian church in the city of Athens would be a sweet accomplishment indeed. I think Paul wants it badly. I think he assumes the Spirit will back it, and that the Spirit will want it for all the same reasons Paul wants it. I may be reading this into the story, but I think we can feel the eagerness and anticipation on Paul’s part. He can hardly wait for Silas and Timothy to join him in Athens, and he anticipates that there will be a great work to do there. (At least Athens will be far more important than Berea.)

In my view, Athens is Paul’s most miserable failure. Paul prepares for his ministry there more carefully than usual, and crafts perhaps the best sermon of his career. (Acts 17:22-31) Most of us admire and consider it a great sermon still. But in terms of its effect, it is a dud – and so is Paul’s entire ministry at Athens. Very little comes of it. Almost nobody responds to what Paul is preaching. I find that strangely comforting. But never remind me that I said that.

I get a lot of argument from some of my friends about these conclusions, I suspect because some people just don't like to realize that even Paul could fall flat on his face. But I consider the evidence to be overwhelming. Check it with me:

1.) No church is started at Athens. Luke sloughs over it a bit with a lame remark: Some responded, he says, including Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and – vaguely into the wind – “others.” That's it? But Paul had been doing his usual thing, preaching and teaching in the synagogue. The sermon at the Areopagus was only the final effort – which instead of launching the mission, closed it down. (Had Dionysius invited Paul to speak? He was a member of the Council of the Areopagus, the supreme court of Athens. Had Damaris been present for the sermon? Greeks were among the worst in terms of their low opinion of women. It is unlikely that Damaris would have been permitted to attend.)

2.) Paul leaves abruptly. (18:1) He never attempts to be heard again in Athens. He even leaves before Silas and Timothy can join him there, though that had been the plan. (They track Paul to Corinth. (18:5)) Paul never returns to Athens. He never writes a letter to Athens. As far as we know, there is no church in Athens in Paul's lifetime. He never mentions Athens again. Is that not unlike him, unless the mission failed?

3.) Conjecture: The Athenian sermon is well-crafted, astute. Paul wants the “university boys” to know that he is learned too. And he is! But that will not help him in this situation. Jesus had said, “*If they will not receive you, shake the dust ...*” Paul does that now. He gets out of Athens for good. “You don't want to hear the Gospel? Fine. Then you won't – at least not from me.” Do any of us ever pick up this hint about how to be a good evangelist? Of course, Jesus would never have such an attitude, would He? Except Jesus is the one who tells us to “shake the dust” (take a powder) where we are not well received. And do you remember His instructions: “*Do not cast your pearls before swine, or give dogs what is holy*”? But then, what does Jesus know about being a good Christian? (Since He has quite obviously never tried it.)

Paul had walked “into the world” again, and had started to play on the world's terms. And he discovers once again that it is fruitless to argue or debate real faith issues on the world's terms. This is a philosophical debating society. They are not hungry to know God. They do not seek real truth. They are playing “verbal chess,” amusing themselves

with being clever. Have we learned? Will we ever learn? How quickly (it seems to me) Paul figures it out and moves on. Christianity is not for the people who need it. Christianity is for the people who want it. People who think they are well have no need of a physician. (Mark 2:17) Jesus has come for the lost. Does that leave any of us out?

4.) It is very “telling” to hear Paul’s remarks shortly after his experience in Athens. He goes from Athens to Corinth. Corinth is a tough “port city” – with all the dimensions of real life front and center, and with real, down-to-earth, and often difficult people. But it seems clear to me that Paul reflects back on his experience in Athens and tells us some of his conclusions, which he carries with him into the Corinthian ministry. And at Corinth, Paul has a long, fruitful, and rather difficult ministry. Fortunately, we get to read some of these reflections in his letters to the Corinthians. When he writes (in the first letter) “When I came to you,” I think we can add “right after I left Athens ...”

So what is Paul’s learning curve from the Athens experience?

“For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.” (I Corinthians 1:17-25)

Does it not seem clear that Paul has reflected deeply on his efforts to persuade the Athenians on their own terms, and that he realizes now that this was not a viable approach? We aren’t so sure that the Christian church (and its people) have tracked this as clearly and as well as Paul did. We keep trying to use the “ways” – the information, the methods, the logic – of the world to talk the world into believing in Jesus. When we do succeed, we only succeed in reducing Jesus to the

level of the world – and in reducing the interests of the church to the level and interests of the world around us.

Paul goes on to muse that only in humility and “interior awareness” – or spiritual awareness – can we even begin to notice or respond to the presence of God. Pride in our intellect, our logic, or our understanding is only a barrier to the awareness of the presence of God.

“But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption. Therefore, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’” (I Corinthians 1:27-31)

If we are still boasting, we are shut off from learning and receiving. Only in humility (and gratitude) is the heart open to receive more. The old Rabbi was teaching his class about the passage which says that we must place the Torah on our hearts. A bright young lad asked, “Why do we put the Torah *on* our hearts? Why not put it *in* our hearts?” The Rabbi replied, “We do not have the ability or the power to do such a thing. We place the Torah *on* our hearts so that when our hearts break, the Torah will fall in.” (It is the only way for it to get there.)

People without broken hearts have little notion of what our Way is for or about. They do not understand when we say, “In Christ’s army, only the wounded soldiers can fight.” Our Way is the Way of the Cross. “*My power is made perfect in weakness.*” (II Corinthians 12:9) The only thing of real value that we have to offer others is our own experience of surrender, of powerlessness, of failure, of loss – and of how the Spirit dealt with us at such times. All over the world, there are successful people giving seminars and classes and writing books full of advice about how other people can be successful. But that is not our Way. We tell people of our brokenness, of what we have been through, of where we found hope and the presence of God when we thought all was lost. Most of the world doesn’t like or want to see us coming. But here and there we discover others who are not playing the world’s games. They have run into blank walls and huge storms too. They are eager to hear us, and often they have much to tell us as well.

In any case, Paul finds the Athenians to be proud of their philosophical prowess, and therefore unable to hear or learn anything beyond what they already know. Pride is the ultimate barrier between humans and God because, by definition, pride does not think it needs God. When Paul realizes this is the situation at Athens, he walks away, knowing that nothing that matters can come of his spending more time or energy there.

And at Corinth, Paul seems to have refined his approach more clearly than ever before. *“And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”* (I Corinthians 2:1-2) This is the message Paul never even “gets to” at Athens. I cannot keep from wondering if he is thinking that “this wouldn’t go over very well at Athens.” Is he trying to be more erudite and clever on purpose? If so, he quickly recovers himself. *“And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”* (I Corinthians 2:3-5)

Paul will not carefully craft any more fancy sermons. Be careful; I have known more than a few preachers who did not spend much time on their sermons. They were not Spirit-filled; they simply had very little to say. That is not respectful of the Message, or of the congregation either. Though it’s easy to jump to false conclusions, the problem for Paul is not solved by him no longer caring about the Message. But he will no longer try to outsmart his hearers, or trick them into believing. He will simply put it out there, and what comes of it is not his business or his problem.

Please note that Paul does not claim that there is no wisdom or power or “rhyme or reason” to the Gospel. It is simply on an entirely different plane: *“Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.”* (I Corinthians 2:6-8)

Do we hear that? There is a very different layer of comprehension and understanding available to us. And that takes us to one of Paul’s most powerful teachings. By the way, many people hate this teaching, complain about it, mock it, and disdain it to this day. Somehow it fits

into the whole category of the reality of the Holy Spirit. Apart from the Holy Spirit, which is the most neglected area of Christian understanding in most churches today, I consider the Christian Message and Life to be unintelligible, incomprehensible. So Paul continues:

“... these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given to us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. ‘For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?’ But we have the mind of Christ.” (I Corinthians 2:10-16)

Whew! Wow! Omigosh!