

January 21, 2006

Deciding On Whether to Attend Church

Acts 18:1-17

When Luke writes that “Paul left Athens and went to Corinth,” I wonder if there is more to that one sentence than what meets the eye. If Athens were the leading cultural and intellectual center of the ancient world, Corinth was the infamous model city of disrepute. Over one thousand temple prostitutes of the Greek goddess Aphrodite lined the streets of Corinth enticing men with their sexual charms. Many a morally strong man fell victim to their alluring ways. When Paul wrote a letter to the Corinthians that he was with them “in weakness and in much fear and trembling,” did he have in mind the temptations associated with the flesh? I don’t think it is much a stretch to think that Paul indeed struggled with his humanity.

But God watches over Paul, just as God watches over you and me. God brings an incredible couple into the life of the apostle—Aquila and Priscilla. Only recently had they arrived from Rome where they had been expelled by the emperor Claudius. Suetonius, an ancient Roman historian, tells us that Jews were expelled during the reign of Claudius due to a disturbance caused by a certain “Crestos.” Many scholars believe that Crestos is a misspelling of Christ. If this Crestos is Christ, then it is one of the earliest references in secular history to Jesus.

Aquila and Priscilla were amazing people. You never read of one without the other. Throughout the New Testament this couple travels together and assists in any way they can the cause of Christ. You may recall sometime later they meet and hear the eloquent preacher Apollo and discern that something is a little bit lacking in his preaching. Aquila and Priscilla take him home after church and instruct him in the finer points of preaching. I’ve had a few Aquilas and Priscillas in my own ministry.

Aquila and Priscilla befriend the lonely Paul and the three become fast friends. Luke adds that he worked “with them.” The NEB translates the Greek that Paul “made his home with them.” There is so much more to this statement than what is written on the printed page. The ministries of Aquila, Priscilla and Paul helped to transform the world. These friends who worked together had a profound influence on the early church. Partners in Christ they model what can be accomplished for the kingdom when people work together.

Years ago when I was just a young pastor I visited a man who had spent considerable time in Africa hunting wild animals. In his den were mounted some magnificent animals, one in particular caught my attention—the head of a huge lion. I asked the man what he used to bring down this powerful animal and he responded, “a club.” “A club,” I said, “why you are one brave guy.” He then grinned and said, “Well, there were eight of us in the club.” Working together we can accomplish so much more.

When Silas and Timothy arrive from Athens, Paul decides to spend more time preaching in the synagogue. Every Sabbath Paul met with the Jews to tell them about Jesus. Now remember, Paul did not think of Christ as a new religion but as simply the fulfillment of an old one. The Jews on the other hand were not so sure. The more people responded to Paul’s message, the more the Jews became concerned that they were losing grip on their congregation.

Verse six recounts that the Jews “opposed” Paul, a term that means they squared off to do battle. Paul is like a lot of us—he didn’t come to church to fight, he came to church to learn and worship and pray. Life is hard enough without going to church and getting beaten up. Paul, tired of all the bickering and arguing and fighting, decides to leave the congregation and start a new one—right next door! Don’t you know that thrilled the Jewish congregation! A rival congregation right next door.

Now you want to hear the real punch line to this story? It is bad enough that a few of the members of the old congregation leave, but to add insult to injury the preacher of the old congregation leaves, too. The preacher from the congregation next door decides he wants to join the new congregation that Paul has started. I guess he is tired

of all the fighting and bickering as well. So he and his entire family move their membership to Paul's new congregation. Wouldn't you like to know the rest of that story?

I wonder why Crispus decided to change congregations? Well, you say, he became a Christian. True enough but that in and of itself would not necessarily mean he would have to change congregations. I mean Paul had taught that Jesus was a Jew and the fulfillment of the prophets and law. Following Jesus did not constitute a new religion, at least not in Paul's mind. Besides in my experience people don't often change churches because of theology. Not really. I mean most people don't even know the subtle differences in theology. Maybe theology was a factor, but I don't think it was the deciding factor.

A lot of church growth type people say that one of the most important reasons why people change congregations is location. Perhaps one church is in a better location than another or maybe one church is closer to someone's home than another. But location isn't a factor here. I mean the new congregation is right next door. Location wasn't an issue.

Why did Crispus, the leader of the Jewish synagogue in Corinth, change congregations? Or for that matter why does anyone attend one church and not another? I think I have an idea. But we have to back up a little bit in order to go forward.

Think for a moment about the disciples. For three years these guys followed Jesus. They traveled with him, ate with him, suffered with him, rested with him, experienced dangers and threats with Jesus day after day for several years. What is fascinating is that these guys never really got it. On the last night of Jesus' life these disciples still didn't have a real good understanding of Jesus. Yet they were devoted to him. Why? Because they knew that Jesus loved them. The disciples experienced a kind of friendship and fellowship they had never enjoyed before. In the presence of Jesus they experienced love and friendship of which they had never experienced before.

Take Zacchaeus as another example. Jesus came to Jericho where Zacchaeus was a dishonest tax-collector. Jesus and Zacchaeus had lunch together and after lunch Zacchaeus was a changed man. Why? Certainly not because he understood theology; but in Jesus, Zacchaeus met a man who loved him and cared about him as no one had ever expressed before.

The crowds who heard Jesus preach probably didn't understand a lot of what Jesus was saying but they knew that he cared about them. They saw Jesus as he ate with sinners and prostitutes and common ordinary people. They watched closely as Jesus touched lepers and diseased people from the lower classes of society. The crowds adored Jesus because they knew that in Jesus they had a friend who loved them as family.

Isn't that what we are all looking for—family? A modern day observer has said that we are a homeless generation. People today are searching for a place to call home, a place where they are cared for, loved and accepted. There is no place like home.

Over and over again we see that people are drawn to Jesus' circle of friends through the love and concern that Jesus expressed toward them—tangible ways of showing compassion. In the band of followers who gather around Jesus there is a love that transcends any other earthly experience. When Jesus says that the world will know them by their love, he was referring to the love his disciples learned from him. His words have pulled at the hearts of men and women for centuries. Every human being longs for this kind of community, this circle of love.

Do you know what we call that circle of friends that gathers around Jesus? We have a name for it. It is called church or congregation or community. Whatever name one uses, life lived with other followers of Jesus offers people the most intimate and authentic relationship of existence. In a congregation or church we are loved as no where else.

Congregation, community or church is not a building; these words are symbols of people clustered together, sharing life together. I guess the closest word that expresses this bond is *family*. A *Family* is people with whom you share trials and joys; people without whom you simply could not make it.

During the Christmas season the deacons of our church reached out to several single moms. The deacons recognized how difficult are the lives of these mothers trying to raise children sometimes with very little support. One single mom wrote Susan a letter that said, “I looked for friends and love in the wrong places. The church has been so wonderful. We wouldn’t have made it through the past year without my church family.” Ask this young mom if she encounters the presence of God through the lives of her friends at Deermeadows. She will tell you a resounding “yes.” Jesus said that “wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, I am with them” (Matt. 18:20). Quite simply in community, congregation or church, people find God. It is the family for which we all long.

Can you imagine Paul without Aquila and Priscilla? Sharing their lives together they were able to strengthen and support each other. Without Aquila and Priscilla I think there is doubt as to whether Paul would have made it through. Somewhere along the way he would have simply run out of gas, he would have fallen by the wayside. How special was this relationship? In Romans 16 Paul says that Aquila and Priscilla risked their lives for me. Wow!

Paul needed the fellowship of friends, friends who were as close to him as family. He found it in what we call community, church or congregation. Paul’s work was difficult and he needed support. Paul knew that there were dangers around every corner. He never knew when his life would be forfeited.

It wasn’t long before the congregation next door decided to rid themselves of Paul and the competition of the congregation next door so they dragged him to the governor of the region, Gallio. The Jews said that Paul was trying to subvert their faith. Gallio looked at these argumentative Jews and knew he wanted no part of them. He told them he wasn’t interested in their congregational problems.

The Jews are so outraged at Gallio that they take their frustration out on their new preacher, Sosthenes. Right there on the spot they grab Sosthenes and beat him up. Sosthenes, you remember, had taken the place of Crispus. Now maybe we know why Crispus left that congregation. Looks like that congregation enjoyed beating up their preacher and maybe any member who didn’t walk the line. I sure would hate to pastor that congregation. Now where do you think Sosthenes was going to go to church next Lord’s day? I think maybe Paul’s congregation had another new member, don’t you? People will always attend a congregation where they experience and sense the love of God through genuine relationships with other people.

I can’t even begin to tell you how important life together with others is. We simply could not make it through without the love and support of other people. Every one longs and yearns to spend life in community—with people with whom they can share trials and joys, people without whom they simply could not make it.

Someday you will stand before the Pearly Gates and meet St. Peter. He will greet you with a warm smile and welcome you into the life for which our hearts have always longed. After the greeting Peter will say to us, “By the way, I passed a group of people on the way to pick you up who all are so excited to see you.”

“Well, who are they,” you ask.

Peter begins to name names. He names people who served as your Sunday School teachers, the ones who led you to Christ. Peter brings to mind people who stood by you when your family was going through crisis, when you lost your job. Name after name of people who encouraged you during difficult times.

“Yeah, I know those people,” you say to Peter. “Those are the people with whom I worked, serving our Lord. I shared my trials and joys with those people. I simply could not have made it through life without them.”

“Well, come on in. They are all waiting on you. They’re making a sign or something.”

“What does the sign say?” you ask.

Slowly Peter looks into your eyes, grins, “The sign says, ‘Welcome home.’”