

Acts | *The Incendiary Fellowship*

How the Gospel Changes Lives (Message Determines Method)

Acts 16:1-21

6:11-17

Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. And a disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek,² and he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium.³ Paul wanted this man to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.⁴ Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe.⁵ So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily.

⁶ They passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; ⁷ and after they came to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them; ⁸ and passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. ⁹ A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰ When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

¹¹ So putting out to sea from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and on the day following to Neapolis; ¹² and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia, a Roman colony; and we were staying in this city for some days. ¹³ And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to a riverside, where we were supposing that there would be a place of prayer; and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled. ¹⁴ A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul. ¹⁵ And when she and her household had been baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us.

¹⁶ It happened that as we were going to the place of prayer, a slave-girl having a spirit of divination met us, who was bringing her masters much profit by fortune-telling. ¹⁷ Following after Paul and us, she kept crying out, saying, "These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation." ¹⁸ She continued doing this for many days. But Paul was greatly annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!" And it came out at that very moment.

¹⁹ But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the authorities, ²⁰ and when they had brought them to the chief magistrates, they said, "These men are throwing our city into confusion, being Jews, ²¹ and are proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans."

We've been looking at the fifth book of the New Testament – The Acts of the Apostles...written by "Luke, the beloved physician" (Col 4.14) and it documents the spread of Christianity outward from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth (1.8).

This history is also an *apologetic* i.e. it's a defense of the faith. Luke is a historian with a purpose – he takes us behind the scenes in one of history's great marvels – how did this little movement starting in a little city...made up of little people (mostly uneducated and under-resourced) HOW DID this little group spread like fire (“the incendiary fellowship”) and come to saturate and outlast the most powerful empire the world had ever known?

We saw last week, the fundamental MESSAGE of the Christian faith was clarified. That message is LOVE – God loves us, sees us guilty and alienated from Him and out of LOVE He does something! He steps INTO our situation. In Jesus Christ, God lives the life I failed to live and dies the death I deserved to die...OUT OF LOVE. And He gives a new right standing; He gives forgiveness and new life to whoever is desperate enough to TRUST Him. That's the fundamental truth of the Christian Church.

Today we see that clarified message (fundamental) translated into METHOD: last week the message and this week the METHOD. Let's look at the Church's Method:

- 1) Extremely Considerate
- 2) Rigidly Flexible
- 3) Universally Applicable

Last week, the very center and core of the book was the so-called Jerusalem Council. As the Jewish Church was becoming a “catholic” church – and what we mean is that the Hebrew Church was beginning to see the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham that “in YOU will all the nations be blessed” – Jesus Christ is Abraham's Seed; the Blessing to all the nations who came from Abraham's people... and now the nations are streaming in to this multinational church. Before Christ, the Church was a single nation but NOW made up of every nation, people tongue and tribe – that's what's meant by “catholic” church (no longer headquartered in Jerusalem or Rome and no longer a single ethnic group...but international!)

And as we saw, this day of fulfillment required some clarification. “If Gentiles are justified by the obedient life, sacrificial death and victorious resurrection of Jesus Christ...and if that makes THEM full partakers of the inheritance of Abraham, true children of Abraham – well...don't they have to be circumcised to be saved...like all the sons of Abraham before them?”

And all the churches send elders to Jerusalem to decide this issue... representatives from each congregation. And through debate and prayerful discussion and mutual submission, they clarify: “NO! We are NOT accepted by God because we cut off a piece of our flesh and neither are THEY – we are both made right with God by what Jesus Christ accomplished – PERIOD! It's by grace that Jews are saved and by grace that Gentiles are saved!”

And then they go out to announce that to all the churches... it's no longer “us and them” Jews and Gentiles... it's only US – sinners saved by grace.

And as they announce that GREAT news in the churches that had been planted, Paul meets a young man who gets it...a young man who has gifts of teaching and zeal...great reputation! He's a very pleasant surprise; the Greek of v. 1 says, "And behold a disciple named Timothy!" Only problem is, he's Jewish but never been circumcised! And his mother was a Jewish Christian!

No problem, Paul! You don't believe in circumcision as a way of getting God's approval anyway...right?

Well...that's true! But the people to whom we speak in the synagogues we plan to visit...they will see this man with a Jewish mother...and knowing him to have been disobedient... they will be offended and they won't even allow him into the synagogues!

"So, Timothy, are you willing to undergo this painful ritual... so that you will have the credibility to be able to speak to Jewish people about God's grace in Jesus Christ...are you willing to become extremely considerate...so considerate that you'll do this?"

"Yeah...but Paul ...won't some get the wrong idea and think that you've gone back on our fundamental belief that we are ALL totally dependent on what Jesus Christ did...and NOT on our own efforts? Won't some think that you are 'preaching circumcision' (Gal 5.11)?"

Well...we'll continuously make it clear with our brothers and sisters in Christ that WE STILL HOLD TO THE FUNDAMENTAL – that neither circumcision or un-circumcision is anything but only grace, received by faith and leading to LOVE... but because of that fundamental MESSAGE – therefore our fundamental METHOD must be extreme consideration – to do anything we can so as NOT to offend people who do not yet believe...in order to WIN AN OPPORTUNITY to tell them the Good News...

When they ask, "Hey are you guys obeying the Law of Moses...are you circumcised?" Then we can say "Yes!...And speaking of the Law of Moses, how are YOU people doing with the weightier matters of the Law...like justice and mercy...isn't it true that you fail? That WE fail? Wouldn't it be great, if Someone could live perfectly obedient in our place and then suffer that penalty WE deserve ...and then defeat death and prove us acceptable to God? WELL, we know that Person...we have Good News for Law-breakers like YOU... Jesus Christ IS that Person!"

So...because Paul and the missionary band KNEW that God entered into their situation in Jesus Christ, and that Jesus was counted guilty and inconvenienced in the extreme for US...that WE could be extremely inconvenienced for other...we can and must identify with people in order to serve them. The Gospel enables extreme consideration...we give up our rights for others because Jesus Christ gave up His rights for us (Phil 2.5-11)!

Second, the fundamental message of the Gospel enables a stance that is rigidly flexible (extremely considerate and rigidly flexible). As they move along God leads them in a variety of ways. They use common sense to take the most direct routes but that's NOT always what God wants... He closes doors and He forbids them access to certain people and places...

The second paragraph makes clear that God Himself, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus prevented them from going places they wanted to go and that they THOUGHT God wanted them to go... We don't know HOW they were prevented – probably by very down to earth obstacles (e.g. they couldn't get transportation or faced some other insurmountable obstacle) but they determined it to be God redirecting them and they REMAINED FLEXIBLE!

Then Paul the Apostle has a vision of a man from Macedonia begging him to come, "Come help us!" and in v.10 they "conclude" – it's a rarely used Greek word meaning to "pull together" as in the pieces of a puzzle. Together, like they discerned God's directions at the Jerusalem Council – together they concluded – i.e. in open discussion, in debate, in mutual submission, they TOGETHER conclude how God is leading them. Each person on the team is committed to stay flexible... not willful or stubborn.

That's how the message changes the method. And so with us...if we get the Gospel, it frees us to be a part of a team, to be open to God's leading and open to discern His leading ("to bring it together") in community...to listen to others as things gradually become clear... to US. There's wisdom in the multitude of counselors and the Gospel empowers me to be open...to seek consensus within the community of faith...to be assertively submissive!

As they travel...in this flexible, grace-empowered way, they pick up new members along the way. This is one of the famous "WE-passages" in the Acts of the Apostles. Apparently, Luke the Physician and the Writer/Historian, Luke joins the team in v. 10 and the pronouns go from "they" to "WE". Flexibility!

And...they are also... imperfect. The end of CH 15 (just before our reading) is where Paul and Barnabas get into a "sharp disagreement" about John Mark. That's the cousin of Barnabas (Col 4.10) who left the team early in the First Missionary Journey (13.13) So, Paul and Barnabas split us – SADLY...Barnabas wanted to give his cousin another shot...Paul said "No!...I'll take Silas...and Timothyand Luke"

Point is: the Gospel makes you flexible and mutually submissive – but it doesn't make you perfect. Later on I think Paul saw that he may have been harsh with the young John-Mark...and maybe John-Mark grew up a bit...but Paul will eventually ask for Mark's help and pay him some big compliments (2 Tim 4.11; Phm 1.24).

Sometimes, it takes a while for the Big Idea to work itself into our methods and relationships...I'm grateful for the record of Paul and Mark being restored as brothers and co-workers in the Gospel!

Last, the message shows up in our METHOD in that when we're believing it, we become considerate in the extreme, we become committed to flexibility and mutual submission and we see the Gospel as UNIVERSALLY APPLICABLE...

The passage ends with two little vignettes/scenes of two very, very different beneficiaries of the Gospel. The first is a very wealthy, powerful, independent woman and the second is a woman totally dependent and enslaved by evil spirits and enslaved by unscrupulous men...in the urban center called Philippi.

Lydia was a God-fearing Gentile who met with a small group of Jewish and God-fearing women to pray. She was a seller of purple which was a very, very lucrative business...some sources indicate that it was an "imperial monopoly" i.e. that only Caesar's relatives could sell this color of royalty.

She hears the Gospel... the Lord (v.14) "opened her heart to respond" (like it says in 13:48 "as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.") and she is changed. She shares with her household (and that could've been a huge number of people) and they're all baptized...She then becomes insistently generous and opens her home to the missionaries and probably the new church that was forming in that city. A super rich, reputable business woman hears the Good News and the Lord changes her.

And then there's this woman, possessed by the Spirit of a Python (that's the Greek word). It's a reference to the Greek god Apollo who was believed to have been embodied as a python at the temple of Delphi.

She is enslaved by an evil spirit and she is exploited by these charlatans who USE her...like a side-show exhibit (like a case of human trafficking) – she's a total contrast to Lydia...and yet to the high and to the low, the wealthy/privileged AND to the poor and powerless, the Gospel speaks.

The slave-girl seems to be helping to identify the missionaries as messengers of truth but she's being weirdly repetitive and distracting and she says something that is just wrong enough to be really evil and deceptive: "These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you A way of salvation." (17) There's no definite article in the Greek and to pagan ears it would have sounded like Paul and his team were just like every religious show in town.

So Paul, uses the Name of Jesus Christ and the spirit leaves her and the money leaves her handlers – it's a deliberate play-on-words Luke uses: it came out and their hope of profit came out at the very same time!

Here again, Luke wants us to see – this is how the Gospel spread like fire (incendiary fellowship) because we ALL, Jew/Gentile, Low/High, rich/poor – WE ARE ALL dominated by guilt, by evil, by powers and sin...and there is only one Way out – the Way that Jesus Christ is.

That MESSAGE leads to a mode of operation: the church that is getting strengthened in the Gospel (hearing and believing again and again) – that church becomes willing to give up it's rights for the spiritual benefit of pre-believers...the Gospel-soaked church gets committed to flexibility (mutually submissive and discerning God's will/leading together) and last – we see the universal applicability of what Jesus Christ did in His life, death and resurrection.

What about YOU? Are these fruits of gospel life showing up in YOU?

If NOT you may be tempted to try harder but that's NOT how they come about. We get this METHOD only when we get the message – when we keep hearing and believing, “Yes! I am a big sinner and Jesus Christ is a Big Savior – nothing in my hands I bring – simply to Thy Cross I cling...” Keep believing!

And maybe today is the first day for you – welcome to all you (like Lydia) up-and-outers or (like the slave-girl) down-and-outers – may the Lord open your heart to respond...may He give you courage to tell others...maybe your whole household... and may you find rest in Jesus and His people.