

PAUL'S URBAN MINISTRY

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D. L. Moody, the famed evangelist, told this story at one of his meetings: One evening just before Christmas, a man was walking through the streets of an Eastern city. The store windows were all beautifully decorated, and he observed three little girls intensely interested in one of them. He discovered that the girl in the center was blind, and the others were trying to describe the beautiful things in the window. "Why," they said, "can't you see that Teddy bear and that doll? Just look at that pretty pink bow!" But the poor little girl stood with a blank expression on her face and could not appreciate the beautiful things before her. "Now," said Moody, "this is an illustration of the effort we Christians are making to arouse the unconverted to an interest and delight in spiritual things. The reason we can't do so is because the sinner is spiritually blind." Moody had scarcely concluded when a reporter was on the platform asking him where he had heard that story. "Oh," said Moody, "I read it in one of those daily papers. I have forgotten which one." Then the reporter said, "I'm the one who wrote the story because I was there and saw the whole thing. I see now that I'm just like that little girl, spiritually blind." That man was converted then and there.

Today's theme is on ministry and evangelism in the city. Paul made a brilliant contrast to the pagan philosophers of Athens with their studied, philosophical detachment. For a man like Paul, burning with prophetic unction, smug complacency in his hearers was too much to bear. So he left Athens in search of more receptive fields. So eager was Paul to get out of Athens that he did not even wait for Silas and Timothy, then en route. Paul must have felt at least a little dejected as he walked the fifty miles to Corinth.

We get a glimmer of how Paul felt when he arrived in Corinth in the opening verses of 1 Corinthians 2:1-3. "And when I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. . . . I came to you in weakness and fear; and with much trembling." Here's a man who had been through the wringer. However, when Paul arrived in Corinth, some encouraging things happened. To begin with, he met Aquila and Priscilla. "And found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, lately come from Italy, with his wife Priscilla; (because that Claudius

had commanded all Jews to depart from Rome:) and came unto them.” Acts 18:2.

There had recently been an anti-Semitic stir in Rome, and this dynamic couple, Aquila and Priscilla, was forced to move their business to Corinth. Somehow they had both come to Christ and into Paul’s life. They were a great encouragement to the apostle. In the final chapter of Romans Paul calls them his “fellow workers in Christ Jesus,” saying that they “risked their lives” for him (16:3). They were close friends—towers of strength.

In addition, Silas and Timothy now arrived from Berea. “Silas and Timotheus were come from Macedonia.” Acts 18:5. And they brought good news that believers in Thessalonica and Philippi were holding fast.

Paul functioned as a bivocational missionary. He earned a living while doing missionary work in the city. “And because he was of the same craft, he abode with them, and wrought: for by their occupation they were tentmakers.” Acts 18:3. While evangelizing and planting churches he was self-supporting through secular employment. He settled down in the Jewish quarter when he arrived in Corinth. He took lodging with Aquila and Priscilla and was employed as a tentmaker.

Athens was a small city and had fewer than 10,000 people, while Corinth was large, having more than 200,000 people. Athens was an intellectual and cultural center, while Corinth was a commercial center that had sea trade to the Ionian Sea on the west and to the Aegean Sea on the east. It was a blue collar, working-class seaport. In Athens Paul focused on Gentile philosophers, while in Corinth he focused on the Jewish synagogue. “And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded the Jews and the Greeks.” Acts 18:4. The Greeks were Gentile God-fearers. In Athens Paul reaped little fruit, while evangelistic ministry in Corinth produced a great harvest.

The pagan city of Corinth worshiped Poseidon. This was the spirit of the sea, a very important deity to placate and to serve because the city had two seaports, as it was located on an isthmus. The sea was the primary source of its considerable wealth. Poseidon would have promised lucrative commerce in exchange for worship and sacrifices.

Aphrodite was a spirit of free love. Her temple, atop an 1,800-foot hill prominent in the city, was said to have featured 1,000 female slaves who served as temple prostitutes, readily available at no

charge to all men who would glorify Aphrodite and agree to serve her. Few turned her down. Corinth was as well known in ancient Greece for unrestrained immorality as Athens was known for philosophy. Corinthian society itself promoted immorality as a virtue. In the Greek language of the day, the verb “to corinthianize” was synonymous with “to fornicate.” It was the Las Vegas of its day. One could buy anything in Corinth if he had the money. Homosexuality was rampant. When Paul wrote Romans 1:26-28 he was describing what he saw in Corinth. “Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion. Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done.”

There had been culture shock in Athens, and now Paul experienced moral shock in Corinth. Its sweat and perfume and grit would smother Paul’s righteous soul.

When we read that “Paul was pressed in the spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus was Christ” (Acts 18:5) we are to understand that he was “devoted to the Word” (NASB) He began to be engrossed “constrained by the Word.” The coming of Silas with gifts from Macedonia set Paul free from tentmaking for a while so that he began to devote himself with fresh concentration to preaching. He proclaimed Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

Jesus was set forth before the Corinthians, when Paul preached to them, as openly crucified before their eyes. So vivid was the presentation that they could actually see Christ crucified. It was not skillful word painting on the part of Paul, nor imagination on the part of the Corinthians, for then it would have been only deception. No; it was an actual fact; Christ was there, crucified, before their eyes, and Paul by the Spirit enabled them to see Him. We know that it was not Paul’s skill in making beautiful word pictures that enabled them to fancy that they saw the crucifixion, for elsewhere Paul says that he determined to know nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified, and that he purposely and carefully refrained from using the wisdom of words, for fear that he should make the cross of Christ of none effect. 1 Cor. 1:17, 18; 2:1-4.

Paul determined to know nothing but Christ and him crucified; and that was what gave him success. Even so will it be in these days. The only thing that we as Seventh-day Adventists need to know is what is termed among us the third angel's message, which is but another name for the closing up of the everlasting gospel.

The gospel is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth. All men are in the same condition, having the same need. "All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23), and all who believe are alike justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

"Christ and Him crucified," is all that Paul wished to know; it is all that any man needs to know. Thus the one thing that men need is salvation; if they get that, they get all things; but salvation is found only in the cross of Christ; therefore, God puts before the eyes of men nothing else: He gives them just what they need. Jesus Christ is by God set forth openly crucified before the eyes of every man, so that there is no excuse for any to be lost, or to continue in sin.

The suffering Messiah as the fulfillment of prophecy was an intolerable thought to the Jews. This is what set them off. "They opposed themselves, and blasphemed." Acts 18:6. They organized themselves to fight Paul's teachings and even to blaspheme Christ's name. Paul was prepared to dialogue with the rabbis and calmly explain from the Scriptures about the suffering servant of Isaiah; the royal Priest of Zechariah riding the sacrificial colt, but they covered their ears from hearing and talked over him.

Therefore, "He shook his raiment, and said unto them, Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean: from henceforth I will go unto the Gentiles." Acts 18:6. It reminds us that while evangelism is a joyous privilege; it is also an awesome responsibility. Paul declares, "I am pure." My conscience is clear. I have discharged my responsibility. Jesus' instruction was to turn from those who reject the gospel and "shake off the dust from your feet" (Matt. 10:14). Paul does something similar by brushing off his garment and declaring that their "blood" or life's destiny was in their own hands. Paul's ministry in the Corinthian synagogue was history!

The story is told about an atheist who confronted a preacher, saying, "Do you believe in eternal life?" "Well, its a load of rubbish!" shouted the atheist. "I believe in science, evolution, survival of the fittest, and when we die, that's it! No eternal life, no great judgment, and no God!"

The atheist continued his assault against the preacher repetitiously and tirelessly. “Eternal life! Eternal life! Ha! Its all pie in the sky when you die. When I die that’s it, the end, no eternal life, no nothing.”

He continued on, “And I will be buried six feet under when I die and that’s it! Nothing! Caput! When I die I am utterly convinced that that will be the end of me!” The preacher replied, “Well thank God for that!”

Not only were the Jews eager to get Paul out of their synagogue, but from Paul’s own tactical point of view it would also be time to leave. At this juncture, Paul had gathered a good nucleus of Gentile God-fearers who had been attending the synagogue. His ultimate goal was to built a strong Gentile church in the Gentile city of Corinth, and these new believers could now move out among their friends and relatives in more aggressive evangelism. They would be most effective if they could then bring their new converts back to worship in a more familiar Gentile-flavored environment instead of into a Jewish synagogue that would have seemed strange and uncomfortable to them.

“And he departed thence, and entered into a certain man’s house, named Justus, one that worshipped God, whose house joined hard to the synagogue.” Acts 18:7. Paul took his fledgling church from the synagogue to Titius Justus’s house, which would be much more accommodating. Justus was a Roman, and probably a wealthy one at that, because his house next to the synagogue must have been a fairly large one. Although the church that met in Justus’s house would be composed of predominantly Gentile converts, some believing Jews also formed a part of it. And one of them happened to be a Jewish celebrity:

“And Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his house; and many of the Corinthians hearing believed, and were baptized.” Acts 18:8. When Crispus “believed on the Lord,” it must have been a headline conversion. Crispus and Justus were two of only three people in Corinth whom Paul baptized personally, all of them VIPs. Was it significant that Crispus had not been converted while Paul was still preaching in the synagogue where Crispus was the president, but then he did accept Christ after Paul moved out? This was followed some time later by what was undoubtedly an equally high-profile conversion of Crispus’s successor as president of the synagogue, Sosthenes. He is mentioned in Acts 18:17 as being

the chief ruler of the Jews, but then in 1 Corinthians 1:1 as being a believer in Jesus Christ.

Crispus's conversion may have been an illustration of the outworking of a statement that Paul makes later when he writes to the Gentile believers in Rome: "For I speak to you Gentiles; inasmuch as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, if by any means I may provoke to jealousy those who are my flesh and save some of them" (Rom. 11:13, 14). In Corinth, when Paul moved out and began speaking directly to Gentiles, a prominent fellow Jew and his family were apparently "provoked to jealousy" and then saved.

In contrast to Athens, the nucleus of a solid church was established in Corinth. Both Jews and God-fearers formed the nucleus, but before long it was composed predominantly of formerly pagan Gentiles. They were baptized, but not by Paul. He later said to them, "I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, lest anyone should say that I had baptized in my own name. For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel" (1 Cor. 1:14, 15, 17).

Some of these church members were from the elite segments of society. There were those described as "not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called" (1 Cor. 1:26). House churches were the rule in those days of urban ministry. There is certainly a place today for house churches. Places where neighborhood evangelism can take place as midway stations in transitioning people from pagan culture eventually into the house of God and the fullness of the body of Christ.

The devil, according to legend, once advertised his tools for sale at public auction. When the prospective buyers assembled, there was one oddly shaped tool, which was labeled "Not for sale." Asked to explain why this was, the devil answered, "I can spare my other tools, but I cannot spare this one. It is the most useful implement that I have. It is called Discouragement, and with it I can work my way into hearts otherwise inaccessible. When I get this tool into a man's heart, the way is open to plant anything there I may desire." If there is one thing that is constant it is that we all are subject to discouragement.

Today if you visit Thomas Carlyle's famous home in London, they will show you an almost soundproof chamber that Carlyle had built so the noise of the street could be shut out and he could work in silence. One of his neighbors, however, kept a rooster that several times in the night and in the early morning gave way to vigorous self-

expression. When Carlyle protested to the owner of the rooster, the man pointed out to him that the rooster crowed only three times in the night, and that after all could not be such a terrible annoyance. "But," Carlyle said to him, "if you only knew what I suffer waiting for that rooster to crow!"

Many of us are pros at borrowing trouble. We feel harassed as we wait for something disastrous and unpleasant to happen. Paul prayed about the future. This may seem unusual to many of us today who have been programmed by a Western worldview. Most of us, have never had God communicate to us through a vision. But for large numbers of people in the Third World today, as happened for first-century men and women, receiving a revelation from God through a vision was a means by which God communicated His will. What did God say to Paul?

"Then spake the Lord to Paul in the night by a vision, Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace. For I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee: for I have much people in this city." Acts 18:9, 10. Just so Paul would make no mistake, the Lord chose to speak to him eyeball to eyeball. He was told not to leave Corinth at that time, but to stay on, and (1) he was to keep preaching; (2) the attacks being planned would not hurt him; and (3) there would be much fruit for his ministry in Corinth. Paul, therefore, spent "a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them." Acts 18:11.

As we think of the challenge of evangelizing the Corinthians of today, we might be compelled to conclude that the whole world has become a Corinth. The rampant disregard for moral standards is no longer confined to a few cities. It is brought right into homes through television. The church is inevitably affected by it. Just as some Corinthian Christians succumbed to the temptations surrounding them, contemporary Christians also give into the loose moral lifestyles portrayed in the media. Sadly, it seems that far too many have been doing this, so much so that in certain Western countries the percentage of Christians involved in extramarital sexual activity is not different from the percentage in the rest of society. Even Christian ministers and evangelists succumb to immorality.

What is equally as bad, churches seem reluctant to be forthright in condemning these sins. Some leaders think that they have no right to pry into the personal lives of other people, so they ignore what they hear about their members. Preachers are afraid to condemn in

because they might lose some of their people to the church “down the road.”

This is all contrary to Paul’s attitude. He urged the church in Corinth to take urgent action against such sins in the church. “And you are proud! Shouldn’t you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? . . . God will judge those outside. ‘Expel the wicked man from among you.’” (1 Cor. 5:2, 13). The fact that the Corinthians lived in an immoral culture did not cause Paul to lower his moral standards. God calls us to go out into this immoral world as witnesses not only to his love but also to His holiness.

We bear the good news of God’s everlasting promise that it’s easy to be saved and hard to be lost, if you understand how much God’s love has delivered you from sin when Jesus died on His cross. If you will not hinder His love from entering your heart, you will be changed and choose to follow Jesus all the way. His faith will conquer all sin in your life—sinless living in sinful flesh. This is the promise of God. “The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.” 1 John 1:7.

We have been highlighting the personal responsibility of Christians to testify to God’s truth. We do have good news to share with people. God has already forgiven their sins in Christ’s death. He does not have anything against them. They are justified and their existence is by virtue of the cross. Now we bid them “be ye reconciled to God.” Experience this glorious gift and be at peace with God.

With today’s aversion to guilt, possibly because our generation does not know the freedom of forgiveness, many are reluctant to witness for Christ. The new covenant perspective of witnessing is that we are constrained by the love of Christ to sharing Him with others. We speak of witnessing and the joy of doing it. But sometimes the anticipation of joy in witness is overcome by fear of rejection and failure or by spiritual lethargy, so that we do not fulfill our calling to witness for Christ. It’s not by a sense of duty or obligation that we witness. The love of Christ constraineth us.

Yet we are sobered by the knowledge that, just as the master evangelist Paul experienced rejection, so will we. Our own people may reject the message. We may have to give them stern words of warning, as Paul did with the Jews. We may even move away from them because of their contempt for the truth. But, like Paul, we will not lose our yearning for them. We will mourn their rejection of the

gospel (Rom. 9:1-3) and pray for their salvation (10:1). And may Paul's stern rebuke to the hardhearted Jews never be used as an excuse for anti-Semitism!

We must be careful about making absolute principles out of Paul's action of moving away from ministering to the Jews in Corinth (v. 6). Some people have a worldview so different to ours that it may take a long time for them to understand the gospel or be receptive to it. God may be calling us to dedicate an entire career in ministry to serve among a resistant people and not see much visible fruit. But this passage does give us freedom to ask whether groups we are seeking to reach for Christ have hardened their hearts so much through their blasphemous attitude that we are released from our responsibility to them, so that we can concentrate on others.

All of life is tinged with pain and frustration. So the familiar song—"Oh what a beautiful morning! O what a beautiful day! I've got a beautiful feeling, Everything's going my way!"—is almost never true.

A peasant living in the woods composed a brilliant piece of music called "Winter Sunshine." In this piece, "against a subdued and even somber background, there stood out melodious patches of remarkable beauty and infectious gaiety." When asked about the inspiration behind this piece, he replied that he "had always held that the happiest man on the face of the earth is the man who can make most of the sunshine that breaks up and brightens the winter." For a Christian the bursts of sunshine that God gives us in the midst of our deepest crises are evidences that He is with us, that He will see us through.

It was 1916, and Hattie Green was dead. Hattie's life is a sad demonstration of what it is like to be among the living dead. When Hattie died, her estate was valued at over \$100 million; yet Hattie lived in poverty. She ate cold oatmeal because it cost money to heat it. When her son's leg became infected, Hattie wouldn't get it treated until she could find a clinic that wouldn't charge her. By then, her son's leg had to be amputated. Hattie died arguing over the value of drinking skim milk. She had money to meet her every need, but she chose to live as if it didn't exist.

The old hymn goes like this, "Just when I need Him Jesus is near; just when I falter, just when I fear. Ready to help me, ready to cheer. Just when I need Him most."