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How to Start Up a Church Plant

Text: Acts 16:6-40

Key verse: Paul and his companions traveled ... *having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia.*

When they came to the border of Mysia, ... *but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.* ...

During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” After Paul had seen the vision, ... *concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.* (vv. 6-10)

Introduction

I understand we are in the age of postmodernism and post-Christendom with low interest toward Christianity. *How to build up a church plant? A mission impossible?*

We all know that it is definitely a big challenge, if not impossible, to start up a church literally with your bare hands from ground zero. By statistics, I am told that usually 30 to 40 % church plants will die. But I speak to you: in scriptural view, if the church plant belongs to God and is his mission, God will make it work. What God often does is to invite us to work for and work with him, and thereby to be his witnesses in the gospel of salvation. God invites us to walk with him in this journey of faith, by experiencing his providence and his faithfulness in building up a church.

Today, the chosen text in Acts speaks of the same message of God’s assurance and promise. God shows us how he started up the church plant at Philippi and called Paul and Silas, together with their mission team, that includes Luke, the writer of Acts, to work with him and witness how God’s work was done miraculously. The whole mission team, through persistent attempts of outreach in Philippi, in the power of the Holy Spirit, converted Lydia & her family, the demon-possessed girl, and the jailer with his family. These new converts subsequently became the core group of this church plant. This core group later grew to become the Philippian Church, which is one of the vibrant churches in the New Testament.

I. God’s Mission, beginning in his calling

When God starts his mission, he calls his servants to work with him. In setting up the church plant in Philippi, God called Paul and his team to join him. When Paul made the second attempt to preach the gospel to the Gentile world, the so-called second missionary journey, God gave a vision to Paul. Originally, Paul planned to revisit Phrygia and Galatia, as well as Mysia and Troas for a preaching ministry (vv.6-7). But the Spirit diverted Paul instead to Macedonia in an urgent vision. In the vision, a man of Macedonia invited Paul, “*Come over to Macedonia and help us.*” Surrendering to the sovereign leading of the Holy Spirit, Paul gave up his initial plan and followed the footsteps of the Holy Spirit to Macedonia. In retrospect, we now understand that Paul opened up the preaching of the gospel to a new world, extending the gospel ministry to the eastern part of the Roman Empire and reaching to Europe. In this new page, God wanted to set up the first church plant at Philippi in Macedonia. And this is how chapter 16 kicks in.

To be honest, we often claim we want to serve according to God’s will. But if we really mean what we say, we have to be ready to give up whatever we think is the best in our planning. It is true to say that the



interplay of human strategic planning and the sovereign leading of the Holy Spirit sometimes converge into one; but sometimes they diverge in surprisingly opposite directions. In this regard, we must be willing to surrender our best thought, even something we are so proud of, in order to give way to God's plan. And Luke right here gave his written testimony that Paul and his team gave way to God's other plan of gospel outreach. This is very much about the spirituality of humility, whether we really mean what we say in confessing Christ as the sovereign head of the church, or we are merely turning Christ into a rubber stamp.

II. God's Mission, growing by seeing the sign of conversion

No doubt, God's heart is for outreach and conversion. I say that baptism is the sign of God's presence, showing that God is at work in your ministry. This is also truly manifested in Paul and his team's ministry in the city of Philippi. Please remember, God's heart is for outreaching, as in his Great Commission, not to set up a church plant with transferred membership.

Paul and his mission team went to the city of Philippi, "*the leading city of the district of Macedonia.*" During Roman times, the fame of Philippi climbed fast among all cities after the decisive second civil war in 42 B.C. and thereafter Philippi became a Roman colony directly subject to the rule of the emperor, not under the provincial government. It had a large population in Paul's time.

In v. 12b, "*we stayed there several days.*" Probably, the team did not find the breakout point of evangelism in this unreached city. Not only were there no Christians - Paul's missionary team was the first group of Christians in this city; but also there were very few Jews, therefore no Jewish synagogue could be found. The Jewish law required to have at least ten men to form a congregation. Failing this, the next requirement was to arrange for a place of prayer under the open sky nearby a river. The reason for a place nearby a river is simply because the Jews or the proselytes can practice the rite of cleansing. As a result, prayer and learning the Jewish laws could take place at the open place.

Now, you have to watch how God led Paul and his team in outreach and evangelism. In Acts 16, God gave them 3 opportunities for outreaching, one after the other consecutively.

1) The first story of the conversion of Lydia and her family: Paul and his team waited until the Sabbath day, and went outside the city gate to the river, where they expected to find a place of prayer. Here, a woman came from Thyatira, a town in the part of Asia Minor called Lydia. So her name was remembered as Lydia, in fact possibly meant "a Lydian lady". Thyatira was well known for making purple dyes and for dyeing clothes, industries that were mostly carried on by women at home. As an artisan in purple dyes, Lydia probably came to Philippi to do her trading.

In Luke's witness, Lydia was spoken of as "a God-fearer". On hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ, she made up her mind to receive Christ and also brought her family to receive baptism. We guess that she was either a widow or unmarried woman, with relatives and servants staying with her. This reminds us of another similar story earlier in Acts. Another God-fearing Gentile, Cornelius, a Roman centurion, also brought himself and his family to be baptized after hearing the gospel preached by Peter. God's revelation in a vision to Peter and Cornelius' baptism remained a hallmark of Gentile mission in Christian history. In a surprisingly similar occasion, Luke testified that it was God who "*opened Lydia's heart to respond to Paul's message,*" and this Lydian lady became the first Christian and possibly later the female leader in the Philippian church plant. After baptism, Lydia showed her hospitality by inviting Paul and his companions to stay at her house. Lydia's household eventually became the first house church in Philippi. And I know that this scenario very much resembles our Japanese mission and Good Shepherd Calgary. And if so, God is obviously at work in his missions.



2) The second story of the exorcism of a demon-possessed girl: While on his way to the place of prayer, Paul and his team met a slave girl who had a “Pythian spirit”. The Python was a mythical serpent or dragon which guarded the temple of Apollo. Thus, “Pythian” refers to being demon-possessed. Here, the slave girl could earn money for her owner by using her gift of fortune telling. But what happened is that she kept screaming after the missionary team, “*These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.*” (v. 17b) It is interesting that Luke testifies that the demon-possessed girl kept screaming after Paul “*for many days.*”(v.18a) Why did Paul not drive out the demon earlier? It is probably because Paul understood this would trigger attack against them and consequently imprisonment. Like Jesus, Paul saw that this was not the right time to cause disruption to their gospel preaching in Philippi. However, in the end, it came to a boiling point that Paul had to cast out the demon from the slave girl.

This reminds us of the same scream of evil spirits acknowledging Jesus as the Son of God. In the exorcisms performed by both Jesus and Paul, God wanted the public to see the in-breaking and triumph of God’s kingdom over the evil world, so as to lead the people to hear the gospel call: “Repent, God’s kingdom is at hand.” Paul, therefore, like Jesus, drove out the demon and saved the slave girl.

3) The release of the slave girl led to **the third story of salvation to a jailer and his family.** The owner of the slave girl was angry at losing his source of income due to Paul’s gospel preaching. He stirred up an anti-Semitic sentiment among the Roman citizens in Philippi, and attacked Paul as posing a threat to Roman rule in the religious realm. This looks very much like what I heard from Bishop Azad Marshall of the Diocese of Iran. After revolution, the Islamic government of Iran became strongly antagonistic to churches in his Diocese because all his people are converted Muslims. The Christian Church in Iran, as in history, is a persecuted church. And here in Philippi, despite the fact that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were imprisoned after being beaten and flogged unjustly, which was in fact against Roman laws.

Although they had no protection on earth, God, however, intervened and saved them by a violent earthquake which released them from chains and foot-locks. But God had something more to do in this situation. The jailer was scared to death, assuming that all prisoners, including Paul and Silas, had already escaped in this supernatural act. And the jailer wanted to kill himself because under Roman law, a guard who allowed his prisoner to escape was liable to the same penalty the prisoner would have suffered. Paul stopped him, and made use of this valuable opportunity not to his own benefit but to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with the jailer. As a result, the jailer was so moved by Paul’s sacrificial love that he opened his heart to the gospel. He and his family thus received Christ and were baptized. The jailer in return showed hospitality to feed them and heal their wounds at his own house. See, the gospel transforms a mutual threat and insecure relationship to a relationship in agape without fear. In fact, the story manifests sacrificial love towards one another in this small fellowship. The gospel of Christ brings a new-born life and a new relationship to this Roman city of Philippi.

Conclusion

In the three stories Luke tells us how God led the missionary team in outreaching and engaging with the unreached pagans. You see, there are always people who are open and even longing for the gospel. They are just living in different corners of society. But of course, not everyone welcomes the gospel. There are also people who oppose the Christian message and sometimes persecution is inevitable. The evangelist has to pay the price for preaching the gospel. But the divine promise we hold on to is that God is in reign from the beginning to the end. It is God’s mission; therefore he is at work and in reign. As servants of



God, we need to discern and obey God's will on us and on our ministry. Therefore, in facing crises and danger, it is also an opportunity to become a blessing to people around us. God can turn the curse of the cross into the grace of salvation in Jesus Christ. Suffering and grace go together. In the end, the most important belief and working principle is that: it is God's work, and God is at work. This is truly reflected in Acts 16 in the church plant of Philippi. And the assurance in following God's will is harvesting the fruit of conversion.