

Mission (continued) and the apostolic

We had a break last Sunday from our current series of Mission continued with Henk and our Times of Refreshing weekend. If you remember we've been working our way through Acts and particularly Paul's 2nd and 3rd journeys. We've reached Acts 20, Paul's nearing the end of his 3rd journey and he wants one last conversation with the elders from Ephesus before heading on to Jerusalem. But rather than look in detail at what Paul says to the elders, I want us to take an overview of his journeys and see if we can identify what an apostle is, what he does and what relevance it has for us today.

To do this I'd like to go back beyond where we started this series and begin with his 1st journey in Acts 13. We're going to work our way through from there to Acts 20 so you may want to put your finger in chapter 13. While you're finding it, let me give you a simple definition of what an apostle is. The word means sent or messenger, so at it's most basic level that is what Paul was, a messenger sent by God. In Ephesians 4 he gives an indication of the purpose of this gift, where he states, *And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.*

So this is one of several gifts that work together to equip the church.

Now, if you've found Acts 13 let's start our journey and see what we can discover about mission and the apostolic. (Map of first journey, then zoom into detail of route)

We find Paul in Antioch, with Barnabas and several other prophets and teachers. The Holy Spirit speaks to them, *'set apart for me, Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them'* (v2). A few verses on you'll see that Saul is really Paul. As a result of the Holy Spirit speaking in this way the believers in Antioch fasted, prayed and then sent Barnabas and Paul away. We don't know what else the Holy Spirit may have said but they leave, they go, they **travel**. This may seem somewhat obvious but the apostolic gift is not a stationary one. We'll see that there are occasions when Paul stays for some time in one place but this is a travelling ministry.

They head to the coast and set out for Cyprus. *'When they reached Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews'* (v5). So they are **preaching**. This is another key element of this gift and we'll see it throughout Paul's journeys. They continue this across the island. We don't know how long they were there but they had sufficient impact that by the time they reach Paphos the proconsul has heard and summons them in order to hear their message. He has a magician and false prophet with him who attempts to oppose them. Paul performs a **miracle**, but maybe not what we would have expected, *'Now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and not see the sun for a time.'* *And immediately a mist and a darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking those who would lead him by the hand. Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord.'* (v11-12)

After this they leave the island and arrive at Perga in Pamphylia, where we learn that John leaves them. We'll pick up later that Paul wasn't over impressed with this. But for now we see that right from the outset this is not a solitary ministry. John Mark had come from Jerusalem with Barnabas and Paul and then accompanied them on this trip. Again we'll find throughout Paul's journeys that he travels in **team** with people

coming and going in a very fluid way. This must have been particularly important for Paul given that travel was not easy and would have increased costs with food and accommodation.

After John Mark left them, they travelled on to Pisidian Antioch (approximately 100 miles over the mountains) and once again went straight to the synagogue on the Sabbath. Even though Paul knew that his ministry was to the Gentiles (he'd heard this from Ananias immediately after his conversion and owned it openly in his letter to the Galatians) he was continually drawn to the synagogues. As a rabbi he would have been invited to teach, he chose **evangelism**, ie to preach the good news of Jesus.

The message was well received (v42) with requests for a return visit next Sabbath from the people, and then we see the Jews and others following them, presumably asking more questions. But the following week things changed quickly; huge crowds gathered and the Jewish leaders found that jealousy quickly overcame their desire for good teaching. They contradicted Paul's teaching and blasphemed, which Paul took as a sign he should **change direction** and turn to the Gentiles, who were thrilled and responded with many becoming believers.

Now this next section (v50ff) is really interesting. The Jewish leaders stir up a group of leading men and women, start persecuting Paul and Barnabas and drive them out. They are persecuted and leave. They come to Iconium and a similar thing happens; great response, reaction from the Jews who stir up pressure on them. They are persecuted but stay. The pressure increases and they get wind of a plot to stone them. Persecuted and they leave, moving on to Lystra and Derbe. You could say that they decide to stay until their lives are threatened, and that may be right, but I think there's definitely a **reliance on the Holy Spirit** to direct them. And this is borne out just a little later. They're in Lystra, Acts 14:19-21, *'But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. But while the disciples stood around him, he got up and entered the city. The next day he went away with Barnabas to Derbe. After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.*

We also know that Paul wasn't well at this time. Gal 4:13, *'but you know that it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time'*. His letter to the Galatians is to these churches, Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, Pisidian Antioch; they are in the region of Galatia.

You may have spotted another activity of the apostolic gift, to **appoint elders** in churches. We don't know how long Paul and Barnabas were on this journey together, but when we look at the qualities and requirements of eldership that Paul and Peter outline in their letters (1 Pet 5, 1 Tim 3, Tit 1, 2) are primarily about character, they must have been there long enough to know these guys well; particularly their character and their gifting.

At the end of Acts 14 we see that Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch (that's the one in Syria) from where they were sent, their **home church base**. They report back all that God has done and spend a long time there. This is clearly important for Paul.

Let's take a breather and bring things right up to date. We are Kings Church Oxted, we're an independent, evangelical, charismatic church. We are responsible for ourselves and have a role to play in the community around us. But we're not isolated, because we're in relationship with other churches. Immediate evidence of this is Catherine and AJ leading worship this morning. They are part of Hope Church Sevenoaks. So why them? Well they, like us, are part of a sphere called New Ground. A sphere is a group of churches that relate to an apostle, in our case, Dave Holden. For the churches in Galatia, it was Paul. In turn, Dave relates to other apostles with spheres in the UK and around the world, who are part of Newfrontiers. I don't have time to go into the history of Newfrontiers, but one phrase from a prophetic word in the early days was, 'we are more together than we are apart' and that describes something of the purpose of being together.

Does Dave Holden reflect some of the apostolic evidences we've identified from Paul? Let me read some of his recent tweets and see if you can spot any of them.

Last Friday – off to Paris with Liz (his wife), Jon and Judith Le Tocq (Jon is part of Dave's core team, like Dale, and currently involved with the French churches), French leaders day tomorrow and speaking CVV Paris on Sunday (that's today)
Thursday – good to be with Everyday London elders, venue leaders and some staff
Wednesday – had a great day with Graham and Belinda Marsh (Kings Church Eastbourne, and then on to speak with their pastoral team
Last Sunday – looking forward to being at New Community Church, Sidcup site today. Love home church

16 Nov – really enjoyed my day with the leaders of Freedom Church Liverpool.
Thanks guys for the coffee/lunch/tea crawl round the docks
Freedom Church reply – the pleasure was all ours Dave. Thanks so much for coming up. We are so excited to be part of New Ground
16 Nov – really enjoyed having New Community Church Eltham round our house last night
12 Nov – thanks Kings Church Edinburgh for a great weekend – faith, action, miracles, revival

Right back to Acts (ch15). Some people had come to Antioch and were saying that circumcision was a requirement of salvation. Paul and Barnabas debate and disagree with them, they are singled out to go to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders and when they arrive they are received by them. There's recognition of a '**leader of leaders**' gifting and they stay to be part of the discussion and judgement, as well as chosen to be among those sent out with the responsibility of distributing that judgement to the churches. This also demonstrates **relationship** and **accountability** amongst recognised apostles that is reflected within Newfrontiers, which hosts an annual gathering of sphere leaders.

Paul and Barnabas are back in Antioch having brought the letter and encouraged the church. Acts 15:36, '*After some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are."*' I like this verse because it shows a really personal side to Paul. We can easily see him as this focussed scholar, determined to preach the gospel far and wide, but so much of his writing (much of the New Testament as we have it) is because he **cares for the churches** and hates to see them diverging from the truth and missing the wonderful benefits of being a believer.

Now he and Barnabas have a bit of a disagreement because Barnabas wants to take John Mark along with them again but Paul recalls how he left them on the last journey. Clearly **loyalty** and **trust** are important to him. What's good is that from his

letters (Col 4:10 and 2 Tim 4:11) we find that they've been reconciled as he instructs that Mark should be welcomed and that he is useful to me. But it does mean that Paul and Barnabas go their separate ways: Barnabas to Cyprus, with John Mark, and Paul north with Silas, who he had been in Jerusalem and travelled back to Antioch with them. Again Paul doesn't travel alone but in team. In fact when he arrives in Derbe and Lystra he adds to his team by inviting Timothy, a young man who was well spoken of in Lystra and Iconium, but Paul clearly **sees potential leadership** in him.

Now (Acts 16:6ff) we have a lot of journeying **directed by the Holy Spirit** as he instructs in different ways and quite strongly, 'forbidden, did not permit them and then a vision'. But the impact is remarkable with the gospel taking root in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth and Ephesus. These were cities of differing size but all influential in some way; commerce, trade, education, mining. And it's interesting that despite his ministry to the Gentiles Luke writes in Acts 17:2 that 'according to Paul's custom', he went to the synagogues, to the Jews first. But there's a fluid nature to his stopping or going in these places and it's not always an obvious response to his teaching. In Philippi, Lydia and the jailer respond to the gospel but he quite quickly moves on. In Thessalonica, there is a limited response from the Jews but a great multitude of God-fearing Greeks. However a mob and an uproar results in the believers sending them on to Berea. Here there is an eagerness for the gospel and Paul finds himself meeting daily with those interested. When the Jews pursue them again from Thessalonica Paul is sent away and arrives in Athens, but Silas and Timothy stay behind.

In Athens, while he is waiting for Timothy and Silas to catch up, he again goes to the synagogue as well as daily in the market place. He gets a limited response and moves on to Corinth despite the fact that his team haven't arrived. There he gets a pretty poor response from the Jews, but ends up staying 18 months next door to the synagogue. Moving on from there to Ephesus with Aquila and Priscilla he again goes to the synagogue, gets a great response with the Jews begging him to stay, but he leaves and heads back to home base in Antioch.

I find this fluidity of stopping and staying vs moving and going encouraging because when I look at all Paul achieved, and we haven't even touched on his letter writing yet, I can be tempted to see him as a spiritual superstar and to see apostle at the top of the hierarchical pile of gifts. Now, I don't want to downgrade all he achieved, but ultimately he was a man gifted by God. And when I look around, I see men and women gifted by God. And Paul saw it this way too, when he wrote to the Corinthians about spiritual gifts, that no gift is any more or less important than another. So we see something of his humanity through this journey. He shows he needs to rely on the Spirit, and at one point Jesus appears to him in a vision and has to allay his fears (Acts 18:9-10), *And the Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, "Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; ¹⁰for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city." And he settled there a year and six months, **teaching** the word of God among them.*

There are a few other points to note before we move on, that are not immediately obvious. Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians while he was in Corinth. We know that he left Silas and Timothy in Berea when he moved on to Athens and that they joined him again in Corinth (Acts 18:5). But we learn more from the letter (1 Thess 3:1-6), *'when we could endure it no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith, so that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this. For*

indeed when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass, as you know. For this reason, when I could endure it no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor would be in vain. But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we also long to see you.

So we learn that he sent Timothy, which would indicate Paul had seen growth in this young man that he could be trusted not just to take a message but acting in his own right to strengthen and encourage the church, even possibly to deal with them losing faith in the face of temptation. This is a **development of team**, not just travelling together but being sent on Paul's behalf and responsible for themselves.

And one more thing before we move on, Paul was **supported by the churches** for the churches. In the early verses of Acts 18 we see that Paul worked as a tentmaker supporting himself and teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath, then in v5 things change, *'But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul began devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.'* And we learn more from a letter that Paul wrote later to the church in Corinth, 2 Cor 11:8-9, *'I robbed other churches by taking wages from them to serve you; and when I was present with you and was in need, I was not a burden to anyone; for when the brethren came from Macedonia they fully supplied my need, and in everything I kept myself from being a burden to you, and will continue to do so.'* We see also from his letter to the Philippians that they supported him (Phil 4:15-16), *'You yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs.'*

Let's pause a moment and see how this is reflected today. You'll have seen from Dave's recent tweets that he is often with churches and this shows his care in wanting to support and serve them. But one man can't support over 40 churches in that way, so he has a team of people given freedom to extend his reach and also bring their own gifting. For example, Henk Kersten, who was with us last weekend and is with the church in Crawley this weekend, is also more directly supporting the churches in Europe with a current focus on Romania. Jon Le Tocq is bringing support to the church in France, Chris Taylor has a particular focus on church planting, looking after Brussels, Maastricht and Berlin. Jim Partridge was in Hillingdon last weekend as they appointed new elders. And caring for churches in a different way, we have Phil Moore running the Academy, training leaders in the word to bring strength and good foundations to our churches and church plants of the future. From the original base in Wimbledon this has developed satellites operating in Edinburgh, Guernsey, Paris and next year Brasov, Romania.

What about money? Paul was quite open about money and his support, as well as being flexible depending on the situation rather than demanding a fixed arrangement. In fact just before the verses from Philippians we read earlier he says, *'Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.'*

We are also flexible. In the past Dave has been supported from the church in Sidcup, more recently directly through New Ground. And New Ground is only able to do that through regular support from the churches, like us. And that releases Dave to travel

and bring care, support, encouragement, teaching, direction, training and more – supported by the churches for the churches.

So back to Acts 18 and Paul's third journey. There was probably 2 years or more between v22 and v23, and Paul sets off again not to regions beyond but back to the churches he's been to before. He heads north again and through Galatia, **strengthening the believers**. He finds himself once again in Ephesus and meets some disciples. Probably not those who had urged him to stay on his last visit as they had not even heard of the Holy Spirit! Once again he starts in the synagogue and spends 3 months but despite his best efforts there was little response so he finds space in the school of Tyrannus and is there every day for 2 years.

During this period there are many amazing miracles and what he describes as 'a *wide door of effective service, and there are many adversaries.*' 1 Cor 16:9. We know from Acts that one of these adversaries was Demetrius, a silversmith, who stirred up the people and caused a riot. They were shouting 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians' and they dragged Paul's companions to the theatre.

Pictures of Ephesus

- Artemis
- Large amphitheatre
- Arcadian Way (back to amphitheatre and looking to harbour)
- Small theatre
- Agora – market place
- Main street (looking down to Amphitheatre and harbour)
- Room in house (school of Tyrannus?)

During the 2-3 years Paul was in Ephesus he wrote to the Corinthians (our 1 Cor but his second letter to them), and also his letter to the Galatians. We also see evidence of a **strategic plan** for his future, more than likely stimulated by the ongoing financial needs of the church in Jerusalem, which he encouraged the churches to support. In 1 Cor 16:1-6 he says, '*Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper, so that no collections be made when I come. When I arrive, whomever you may approve, I will send them with letters to carry your gift to Jerusalem; and if it is fitting for me to go also, they will go with me. But I will come to you after I go through Macedonia, for I am going through Macedonia; and perhaps I will stay with you, or even spend the winter, so that you may send me on my way wherever I may go.*'

But there's clearly more to his plan than just managing the collection. In Acts 19:21 '*Now after these things were finished, Paul purposed in the Spirit to go to Jerusalem after he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome."* However he stayed in Ephesus much longer than he expected at that point because of this 'wide door of effective service'. But eventually he moves on and finds his way to Corinth where he stays 3 months.

It's strange what Luke passes over in his account because at the time they probably held little significance. In Acts 20:1-2, '*...he left to go to Macedonia. When he had gone through those districts and had given them much exhortation, he came to Greece.*' During this time he probably wrote another letter to the Corinthians (his fourth, our second) and also Philippians. It's also possible that while in Macedonia he pushed north west up into Illyricum. This is the area on the north east shore of the Adriatic, where we currently find Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, Croatia). He probably

wrote Romans during his 3 month stay in Corinth and in Rom 15:19 he says, '*...so that from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ.*'

We know from Acts 20:3 that his plan was to sail from Corinth to Syria to deliver the collection to Jerusalem and that he wanted to get there for Pentecost. So he was waiting for favourable winds, and likely to be on the same boat as Jews heading to Jerusalem for Passover. Maybe they planned to throw him overboard. We do know that he changed direction and returned via Macedonia arriving eventually in Troas to meet up with his companions, who would have been those chosen to carry the gift from their church as Paul had instructed. Moving on from there he avoids Ephesus to keep with his schedule, but calls the elders to meet him. It was about 30 miles from Miletus but not an easy straight route, so took about 3 days in all for a messenger to travel there and bring the elders back.

It's a **hard word** and not particularly encouraging that Paul shares with them. He doesn't know what his future will be but unlikely to include Ephesus so won't see them again. He **prophesies** that savage wolves will come to them as well as those within the church who will speak perversions of the gospel. And pretty much with that he prays for them and leaves.

And finally what of these things do we see today? At Ashburnham this year Dave encouraged us to give an offering that would be to serve the churches. Some for things like travel and training for those churches that are unable to contribute. Some for relief around the world when we hear about particular needs. And some to fund church plants into strategic towns and cities that individual churches couldn't sustain.

What about changes of direction? Well there hasn't been a plot to drown him, but Dave had planned to go to Zimbabwe and Mozambique earlier this year. However he was suffering a bad back that meant he was unable to fly and had to change his plans. We don't know why these things happen. God could just as easily have protected Paul from the plotting of the Jews and he could have healed Dave in time for the trip. Sometimes we just have to change direction.

Without going into details, I am and have been aware of difficult and challenging situations that the apostolic guys have had to deal with, bringing correction and often hard words to leaders and churches. They're not easy but easier than living with the consequences of not speaking up.

Let me finish by explaining why I have approached the subject in this way. I think for most of us we are largely unaware of the role or influence of the apostolic gift within the church. And what I've tried to do is show that just as in Acts the role and influence is there but not always immediately obvious.

I imagine that with all this talk of Paul you may have picture in your mind of what he was like, well this is a description from the 2nd century:
'...a man small in size, with meeting eyebrows and a rather large nose, bald-headed, bow-legged, strongly built, full of grace; for at times he looked like a man, and at times he had the face of an angel.'