

PAUL TACKLES THE CITIES

Scripture Reading: Acts 18:1-4, RSV

When I was young and more foolish, I made the mistake of playing tackle football one day without equipment. Anyone who knew me when I was 13 years old will tell you I was a skinny, scrawny kid. Since I wasn't the quarterback, I had to play wherever he told me to play, and he put me on the front line. The other team players weren't stupid; they saw the weak spot in the front line of my team. On the first play a 180-pound fullback was given the ball, and he headed for me. When I woke up three minutes later I realized I had no business tackling anyone who was almost twice my size.

I thought I had learned my lesson but when Joseph Barnes called me from Atlantic Union College to go to New York City to work at the New York Center, I made some mistakes. I was particularly useful to Barnes as an associate, because I knew my way around town. I decided I would "tackle" New York—I was young and idealistic, but I was still skinny. My wife will tell you that for the first six weeks I worked at the Center I did not eat one meal at home—not breakfast, not lunch, not supper. After she let me know how she felt about that, I went in to see Elder Barnes and said, "Look, I've been trying to keep up with you. I realize you're working hard; you're staying over here at night (because he lived out on Long Island), but I just can't do it. I've got a family and I can't keep up with this schedule." He chuckled and said, "I don't expect you to. I'm sorry to hear that you've been trying to do that."

Even after that experience, I still felt like a skinny kid trying to tackle a fullback, as I tried to work in New York City.

We're told that Paul was short and also scrawny but he tackled the big cities of his day. And he leveled them. He didn't feel too good about his experience in Athens, but you must remember (as I pointed out in my last sermon on Acts) that his visit there was a kind of accident. Paul was there on a sightseeing trip and decided to take on the philosophers in the Agora. You can't say he went there for the specific purpose of evangelizing the city and failed. He attempted to do some work while he was on vacation and that may be why it didn't work as well as most of his efforts. I still think it worked better than most people believe.

I realize that Paul was a hard worker, and I'm here to tell you that if hard work is the answer to the cities, then the cities of today should have been won by now. People don't work harder than Joseph Barnes did when he was in New York City. Paul worked hard and I think he may have been tempted to burn out just as the rest of us are when we tackle something that is too big. As I've read carefully the book of Acts and stories about Paul, I can't get over the kind of life he led. If he had had a wife, she would never have stayed with him because she would have been an emotional wreck. He was beaten; assassins were hired to kill him; after preaching for a few months in a synagogue, he would be thrown out and told never to return; people who had been his converts began to look in other directions and repudiated his leadership. Paul should have suffered from clergy burnout. The reason a lot of this happened to him was because he cared about the cities—Corinth, Ephesus, Thessalonika, Philippi and ultimately Rome.

What is even more significant to me is that today we can claim only a modest success among the "majority" population in North American cities. Where we do seem to succeed is in the rural and suburban areas. We primarily have results among those who are already Christianized. Paul's story is

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quite the opposite. He enjoyed success not so much among Jews, although he had some there, but among Gentiles—the non-Christians in his population. He enjoyed that success in the middle of the worst cities that existed in his time. It was no accident.

As we have seen in our study of Acts, Paul did not walk casually into a city; he prepared and thought about it. He knew his culture. He had been raised in the Greek-speaking world. He understood the philosophies of his time and knew about the mystery religions. He knew how to use pagan-Gentile language as he communicated the gospel. He used images and experiences borrowed from their world. Paul had a strategy; he did research and he thought about what he wanted to accomplish in each city. When he went to a city he stayed there—18 months in Corinth, 2 years in Ephesus. No six-week campaigns for Paul. Granted, being single helps. I believe 100 percent in marriage. On the other hand I recognize that single people can do things that married people with family responsibilities may be unable to achieve.

I want to consider Corinth and Ephesus in this sermon and discuss what Paul accomplished there and the events that took place. Even in the perverse period in which Paul worked, the city of Corinth was famous for its debauchery. In the Greek, to be called a Corinthian was to be called a fornicator. The fabulous temple to Aphrodite (or Venus) was located there and it had 1,000 religious prostitutes working in the temple. The city was not wholly given over to vice; Diogenes the philosopher lived there and it had a rich intellectual tradition. Archaeologists point out that on the road to the seaport in Corinth there are two tombs side-by-side, one is that of Diogenes and the other is for a courtesan from the temple.

When Paul arrived in Corinth he went directly to the Jewish synagogue; this was always his strategy. He started by working with the Jews but he also made contact with the Gentile God-fearers, those who had embraced many parts of the Jewish religion. The God-fearers were his access to the Gentile community.

While in Corinth, Paul met Aquila and Priscilla—usually referred to as Priscilla and Aquila, which means that she occupied an unusual prominence in the Roman Empire. This couple shared the same trade as Paul—they were leather makers. Why would Paul work at a trade? There was no organized Christian church to support him. In any event Paul had taken a firm stance on not accepting aid from the church for his personal support (except when he allowed the Philippians to help him). The other reason was that Paul had been trained as a rabbi, and the rabbis in the New Testament period were obligated to support themselves with a trade. It was inappropriate for a rabbi to support himself with his teaching.

After working with Aquila and Priscilla for a while, which gave Paul a chance to plan his strategy for Corinth, Paul left his manual labor and resumed his aggressive preaching in the synagogue. In a short time, the synagogue members got disgusted with his teachings and threw him out. I think something humorous is reported in Acts at this point: When Paul was thrown out of the synagogue, he moved into the house next door which belonged to the leader of the synagogue—his major convert at that time. Even though Paul was brave, he was apprehensive and afraid that he would suffer bodily harm for what he had done. However, the Lord appeared to him and reassured him that nothing serious would happen to him. Paul was to continue to preach for “I have many people in this city.” Going back to my analogy, the Quarterback put him on the front line.

I wish I could have had a vision like that when I was working in New York City. I wish I could have a vision like that now. But I have to remember that these words are for me and for you as well. We have to read this text as saying: The Lord said to Sligo one night in a vision, “Do not be afraid but speak and do not be silent.” I have to be encouraged by the fact that the promise is there. I also have to be encouraged by the fact that Paul committed himself to his work, and God rewarded him with success. In five years Corinth became a major center of Christian activity. Paul cared so much about that city that the largest single portion of the New Testament consists of the letters to the Corinthians. (Some of the letters have been lost.)

Finally the Jewish leaders figured out how to get Paul into the courtroom. He was brought before Gallio, the proconsul of that region. Gallio was the brother of Seneca the philosopher and apparently related to the emperor. Scholars think that Gallio's decision in the courtroom set the tone of events relating to Christians in the whole Roman Empire for the next decade, until Nero came to power. Gallio saw immediately what the Jews were up to: They were trying to accuse Paul of treason against Rome, but the truth was that it was a religious squabble which was strictly Jewish in nature. He refused to do anything with Paul. His decision allowed the Corinthians at least a decade of remarkable freedom to preach the gospel in that area.

While this hearing was going on in an open court, many Gentiles had gathered to see what was happening. When the decision was announced, the crowd took Gallio's snub of the Jewish leaders as an opportunity to seize the new leader of the synagogue, Sosthenes, and beat him up. Although this was done in front of Gallio, he ignored what they were doing and let them vent their rage. The Jews had hoped that Paul would be punished; ironically it was their leader who was attacked.

After spending 18 months in Corinth and building up a church in that difficult city (remembering the looseness of its culture), Paul went back to some of the churches he had established earlier, including Ephesus. Paul continued his travels and later a new leader emerged in Ephesus—Appollos, a Jew from Alexandria who had accepted much of Christianity. Aquila and Priscilla heard his speaking and they were overwhelmed by his eloquence, by his reasoning and by his power to show from Scripture that Jesus must be the Messiah. He was a man who could rival Paul in scholarship and eloquence. They sensed, however, that he didn't have the whole gospel. Rather than embarrass him publicly, they invited him home, and told him the entire message, which he embraced. He had phenomenal gifts which could now be used fully in the service of Christ. He became a tower of strength to the church in Ephesus while Paul was gone. He became so trusted that he was later sent to Corinth with a letter from the elders at Ephesus to help the struggling church in Corinth.

It would have been easy for Paul to resent Appollos and the popularity he achieved, but his letters reveal only complimentary and warm references. In fact, he calls Appollos a “fellow apostle.” He tells the Corinthians that Appollos “watered” seed he had planted. No pride of place, no sense of competition. Paul never allowed anyone to detract from Appollos' work, and as far as we can tell, neither did Appollos permit anyone to downgrade Paul.

Corinth and Ephesus were two cities in which a strong Christian work was established over a four-year period. Paul later returned to Ephesus, was imprisoned there and wrote some of his major epistles in Ephesus. How did Paul crack these cities wide open? Moreover this gospel spread throughout the neighboring provinces in a marvelous way. We ask ourselves, “Why not now? Where are the Pauls? the

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Appollos? Where are the crowds?"

Recently I heard an interview over WGTS-FM with James Engels from Wheaton College. He is chairman of the communication department and also a market researcher. In this interview he discussed the problems Christians have reaching other people, especially those who live in the cities. When he first became a Christian, he felt guilty because he was afraid to witness for Christ. For example, when he rode on an airplane he would pray that no one would sit beside him so he wouldn't feel obligated to share his faith. Can you identify with that feeling? He said he doesn't have those feelings any more and he doesn't pray that same Prayer. Neither does he feel obligated to give a Bible study to everyone he meets. Why? He believes that you have to earn the right to speak to somebody else about your beliefs. You don't possess it intrinsically. He said, "I'd be angry if someone sat next to me and whipped out a sales manual and tried to sell me his product while we flew from coast to coast. I'd feel that he had intruded on me privately and personally and I'd be right. He has not earned the right to talk to me about what he's selling."

Mr. Engels pointed out that we need natural bridges to people, not artificial ones. Once on a flight a stewardess asked if I was a minister (she may have noticed me reading my Bible). When she learned that I was, she proceeded to tell me about her marital problems. This was fine, but I didn't push it on her. I didn't walk up and down the aisle proclaiming that I was a Christian marriage counselor. This experience just seemed to happen in a natural way.

As Christians we have attempted to contact people in an artificial way and to assume that there is only one way to preach the gospel, one way to evangelize a city. Paul didn't use one way, as related in Acts. He varied his approach, depending on his audience. But there is a basic method which we can all use: Every human being needs to be in warm relationships with other people. As Engels said in the interview I heard, "Every person can be a friend to somebody else." That's a basic Christian method. You haven't earned the right to say anything to anybody until you have proved to be trustworthy, committed and a friend.

Engels said that his research can prove that most Christians don't know the major hobby of their next-door neighbor. We just don't know them very well. I have a suspicion that if the church in the 20th century were to shift its emphasis away from doctrinal presentations in public meetings, and more toward relationships, we would see renewed interest in the gospel. If our public meetings proclaimed a discussion on a commonly shared concern, such as communicating with our children, we would get the kind of audience we are seeking. Many of the current bestsellers deal with ways to put meaning into our lives and to improve relationships with our families, the people with whom we work and with all those we come to know.

I have another thought. I wish we were able to gather the believers who live in specific neighborhoods in the Washington area, no matter where they attend church each Sabbath, and ask them to meet once a month as a group committed to their neighbors. The purpose and the mission for their coming together would be to understand, to pray with and to become acquainted with their neighbors. If we had 200 groups like that in this area, I believe we would rejoice at the results. I think this will be possible; we're getting the membership computerized. But the point is to focus on relationships, to earn the right to speak to people about our faith.