

Text: Acts 18:1-17

Intended audience: Christians

Topic: Evangelism

Theme: Opposition in the face of evangelism

My purpose for this message: To help believers see that dealing with fear in evangelism requires an encounter with God.

Delivered: Sept. 5, 2004 @ KEFC

[Book Thesis: *The Power of God Spreads the Gospel*]

### **Handling Threats & Opposition**

Christ, Christianity, and Christians are increasingly disdained in the US of A. The Meriden Public Library in Meriden, Conn. banned five paintings of Jesus Christ. They were disallowed under a library policy that prohibits "inappropriate" and "offensive" fare. Jesus apparently is offensive—or at least inappropriate. Library officials were concerned that children might be *disturbed* by these images.

Ignatius observed, "Christianity is truly great when it is hated by the world." If so, Christianity is finally becoming greater in the United States of America.

Which makes the challenge of evangelism greater.

In Nepal, Laos, Chechnya, the Sudan, and Columbia, just *being* a Christian is dangerous. But here in the states, believers are not only comfortable but approved—if we stay quiet about Jesus. With our law-abiding conduct, we are not just tolerated but admired as long as we play the chameleon and blend in with our surroundings. However to speak about Christ can be dangerous. Especially if we urge someone to follow Him.

This is my fifth and final message on evangelism and today we're going to talk about fear: that four letter word that wires our jaws shut, that waters down what we *planned* to say into something harmless, and the fear that maintains a safe distance between us and the world God sent us to.

The fear that extinguishes witness, was even known to the great evangelist Paul. READ Acts 18:1-17. PRAY.

We will concentrate on vv.1-11 this morning.

#### **1. The Story**

Leaving Athens, Paul walked the 50 miles to Greece's commercial center of Corinth. Nearly all east-west trade between Italy and Asia passed through this city because it was a narrow land bridge between the Adriatic and Aegean Seas, and between Greece and the Peloponnesus.

As in Athens, what Paul saw made his heart heavy. Corinth *too* loved her Greek gods and goddesses. Here was the temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of love. In the city, sacred prostitutes swarmed like flies around a carcass.

But as he had in *previous* Gentile cities, Paul discovered worship of the one true God alive and well. There was a synagogue, *and* Paul soon made fast friends with a Aquila and his wife Priscilla, a couple who shared his trade, *and* his faith. Emperor Claudius had recently kicked them and all the Jews from Rome because of tensions. In his biography of Claudius, Roman historian Seutonius wrote...

*He expelled the Jews from Rome, on account of the riots in which they were constantly indulging, at the instigation of Chrestus.*

The Latin word for “Christ”—*Christus* was commonly misspelled *Chrestus* and while Christ obviously was not in Rome in AD 49, 70 years later, Seutonius could only draw from police records and mistakenly assumed the “instigator” was present.

Apparently orthodox Jews were angry that other Jews were converting to Christ and resorted to violence. How did the gospel get to Rome when none of the apostles had yet visited there? The same way the gospel continues to spread today around the world despite a shortage of preachers and missionaries: by the natural infection of believers as they navigated their homes, streets, markets, neighborhoods.

It seems that Paul worked at his trade of tentmaking because he was short of funds, then preached Sabbaths at the synagogue. But once Silas and Timothy arrived—apparently carrying an offering from the Berean church (2 Cor.11), he was free to devote all of his time to ministry and he preached with all his heart.

When the Jewish response grew ugly, Paul denounced them as he had at Pisidian Antioch in Acts 13:46. “When I go to a city I always begin with my people, the Jews. But with your attitude, I’ll go instead to Corinth’s Gentiles. Maybe they’ll be more responsive.” (6) They were. He moved his pulpit from the synagogue to the house nextdoor. The homeowner was a Gentile God-fearer who became a Christian. According to v.8, many other Gentiles also were saved. But the Jewish harvest was not over in Corinth. The #1 man at the synagogue—Crispus—gave himself to Christ as did his entire family.

However the opposition and threats had taken its toll on Paul and from his heart into his throat rose the clammy fear and anxiety that some of us are familiar with when we share the gospel. It out of character for Paul. But he was made of what *we* are made of.

## 2. Silenced by Fear

“Jesus died and rose again to save sinners.” It’s just 8 words but that message or something like it seems to die in our throats. Even working up the nerve to *try* makes many of us choke.

- What if my neighbor thinks I’m a fanatic and starts avoiding me? Does that really help the cause?
- What if my witness to a relative strains relationships in the family? I don’t want to be responsible for tension in my family.
- What if I talk to a classmate about Jesus? I don’t want to become the butt of snickered jokes in the hallway.

God looked down, saw his veteran missionary’s knees knocking and paid him a special visit. READ v.9-10. Afraid, attack, harm. The kind of fear you might feel the first time you talk to someone about Jesus. For Paul it may have been the 1000<sup>th</sup> time but it was the same, paralyzing, silencing cascading fear.

Until Paul had an encounter with God. Which affected him so deeply that Luke records... “So, Paul stayed a year and a half, teaching...” *As a result* of that encounter, Paul stayed to teach for a year and a half.

- Remember Elijah? Didn’t want to speak for God anymore; wanted to die. Until God met him in the whisper on Mt. Horeb.
- Remember Moses? Wanted to run from his assignment to be Israel’s spiritual leader.
- Gideon was uneasy about becoming God’s front man.

- And Peter lied about Jesus rather than risk arrest at crunch time.

What changed these men? What turned a disheartened prophet with a death wish into God's voice again? What turned a reluctant shepherd into the hero of the Exodus and the icon of Judaism—even *today*? What turned nervous Gideon into a man willing to fight an army of tens of thousands with just 300 soldiers? And what would make a man with a jellyfish spine become the foundation on which Christ built His church?

### 3. An Encounter with God

An encounter with God. When you meet the Ruling God, the Majestic on High, the Fear of Isaac, the Judge of all the earth, fear for man begins to loosen its grip. Rarely does it *vanish* but its hold relaxes. READ Ps.86:11. *Teach me your way O Lord and I will walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart that I may...fear your name.*

There are no certain words, no special prayer or mental gimmicks that strip us of fear. What makes a difference is an encounter with the Living God. You ask, "What do you mean?"

- Not conversion—although conversion *has* this *emboldening* effect on some.
- Not a mystical voice from heaven, a dream, or a vision like Paul's—although some have been so blessed.

I'm talking about a growing courage and deteriorating fear that comes from a fresh encounter with God, a time when we see Him with new eyes. Perhaps from *examining* the Scriptures rather than brushing past them. Or seeking God's *face* in fervent prayer, rather than giving him a perfunctory minute every other day. From pursuing God with our brothers and sisters in quiet conversation, in CONNECTION groups, etc. The writer of Hebrews was not just penning poetry when he twice urged us to "Fix our eyes of Jesus."

Have you "known" the Lord so long that He's "Old Hat" to you? Familiar, yet a stranger? Do you just know information about Him or do you *know* him? Are you living on yesterday's faith or today's?

I want to see God *today*. I want to rediscover Him *today*. What new have you learned about Him lately? How have you seen His hand in action lately? If you haven't, have you been watching? Looking? What is he doing that He's invited you to join Him in doing? What has he been teaching you through suffering? Through your job, through your children, your fellow students? God may not give you a vision, but he is never stingy is giving himself to those who are hungry. He told the Israelites, "*You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.*" PRAY.

#### **Concl:**

Let's wrap up our *series* on evangelism rather than just this sermon. Is telling others about Jesus on your radar screen? If it is, I rejoice. If it is not, what's wrong? For Jesus has left the job of telling about him, to the Church; to us. There is no "Plan B."

In January or February 2005, I will be offering a crash course in evangelism during the SS hour. Probably last just 6 weeks. You will be apprised.