

**“SEASONS IN THE LIFE OF A CHURCH”****Acts 18:18-28****THEME: A study of the church at Ephesus.****DATE: 09/23/07**

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“You can blame all the problems of today’s youth on the absence of healthy role models or on the abundance of rotten role models.” How often have you heard a social commentary something like that?

There are undoubtedly other contributing factors, but this role model thing is a big one.

We don’t get to choose role models for other people, so we watch helplessly as they choose their own heroes.

Getting some role models or heroes to behave themselves can be a greater challenge than redeeming messed-up juveniles.

Look at O.J. Simpson. Twenty years ago or so he was touted as the consummate role model for any kid. Now it’s Michael Vick, Atlanta’s former football hero.

- Even churches get messed up over role models.

As far back as I can remember churches have been modeled after some or other well-known church.

Not too many years ago this church, First Free in Rockford was the model for many churches across the country. They wanted to be like us.

- But don’t you think it would be much, much better to find the model church in the Bible?

It’s not unusual to find a church that advertizes itself as a true New Testament church. That’s nothing to brag about.

Most of the New Testament models were messy. We wouldn’t want to be like the Corinthian church, for instance.

Not all of the New Testament churches remained stable and mature in the faith.

Even the mother church in Jerusalem lost its spiritual vitality quite quickly.

The church in Antioch seems to have been a worthy model, but the Bible doesn’t tell us a whole lot about it.

The reason we know so much about some of the New Testament churches is because they had problems and the apostles wrote letters to warn and correct them, or because they were suffering and weak and the apostles wrote to encourage them.

The point in all this is that most of the help our church gets from the churches in the New Testament is the apostolic instruction to imperfect churches, and not the example of outstanding churches.

- The most helpful of all the churches in the New Testament is the church in Ephesus, a major city in the Roman province of Asia.

In the New Testament Book of Acts we see how the church in Ephesus got off to a good start. Then in the Book of Revelation we see what it was like about 40 years later. And in between we have the Apostle Paul’s letter to the church as well as his letters to Timothy who gave pastoral oversight to the church in Ephesus.

The church in Ephesus is a long-term case study of a church’s life.

- Today we’ll look at how this church began. It had a good beginning because it was born in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Unless a church is birthed in a strong and clear grasp of the good news of Jesus Christ, it will become a spiritual miscarriage.

It is the gospel of Jesus Christ that gets a church off to a good start, and the gospel is what keeps it going well indefinitely. In Acts 18:18-28 we see some **ways** the gospel of Jesus Christ makes a church strong and healthy.

**I. THE GOSPEL ENGAGES THE INTELLECT (18:19-20)**

Any faith that bypasses your mind is phony.

Someone said, *‘The great thing about living in the United States is that people can still say what they think. And even if they don’t think, they can say it anyway.’* (Unknown)

I think it’s disgusting that there is so much nonsense and poppycock proclaimed in the name of Christ inside churches and outside churches today.

Some of the stuff people claim God told them is ridiculous.

But nothing about the gospel of Christ is ridiculous. It’s amazing, wonderful, but never ridiculous.

Robert Raines said, *‘It does not take a great mind to be a Christian, but it takes all the mind a man has.’*

Authentic Christian faith is reasonable faith. A church is a community of people who have grasped the truth of forgiveness of sins and new life in Christ, and have put their trust in him.

If the Apostle Paul was involved, that’s how churches had their beginning.

<sup>18</sup> *Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchrea because of a vow he had taken.*

Paul had been preaching and teaching the good news of Jesus Christ in Corinth for 18 months. Now it was time to head back to his commissioning church in Antioch, Syria.

Before he left Cenchrea, the port of Corinth, he had his head shaved, probably in fulfillment of a religious vow.

Paul was planning to go to Jerusalem first, and it was important for the Jewish Christians there to know that he had not jettisoned his Jewish identity when he began to preach the gospel to Gentiles.

The 300 mile journey from Cenchrea to Ephesus took them past some of the most beautiful Greek islands in the Aegean Sea.

<sup>19</sup> *They arrived at Ephesus, where Paul left Priscilla and Aquila. He himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews.*

Ephesus wasn’t a destination for Paul. He merely came there *en route*.

But even though Paul was just passing through, he made the most of his brief opportunity to introduce people to the truth of God’s grace in Christ. He headed straight for the local synagogue.

Paul reasoned with the Jews. He entered into discussions and debates with them.

Even though we don’t see the word “gospel” in this text, we know that’s it was all about. Paul was showing them proofs that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

Faith in God is a gift from God in response to the gospel of Jesus Christ our Savior. And real faith always engages our minds.

- That was the very beginning of the church in Ephesus. Nothing would have developed there without the gospel.

From the arrival of the gospel in the city, it involved reasoned, logical debate or discussion about who Jesus Christ was.

<sup>20</sup> *When they asked him to spend more time with them, he declined.*

Nowadays preachers are surprised when people ask them to take more time. Listeners are more likely to complain that the preaching takes too much time. I’ve heard people say that if a preacher can’t say it in 30 minutes or less, it’s not worth listening to.

If he can’t boil it down he shouldn’t serve it up.

- It must have been a very positive visit to the synagogue, because the Jews asked him to spend more time with them.

The gospel is good news. We should expect people to be interested in learning more about it—that people are ready to receive it enthusiastically and to embrace it wholeheartedly.

- I find enormous evidence in the Bible that where churches are vital and faithful, the gospel of Jesus Christ is always engaging people’s minds and not just stirring their emotions.

[2<sup>nd</sup> characteristic essential to a church]

## **II. THE GOSPEL EXCITES THE SENSES (18:24-26)**

Whenever you find a church that is alive and spiritually healthy, you’ll definitely find people who are passionate about sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. They’re energized!

We see this in the next person after Paul who came to Ephesus and preached the gospel of Jesus Christ. His name was Apollos.

- But first’s let’s see what Paul did after he left Ephesus.

<sup>21</sup> *But as he left, he promised, "I will come back if it is God's will." Then he set sail from Ephesus.*

Paul did not feel “called” to Ephesus at this point.

He told the Jews at the synagogue it was in God’s hands.

<sup>22</sup> *When he landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church and then went down to Antioch.*

Caesarea was the Roman seat of government in the region. A Roman garrison was stationed there.

From Caesarea Paul went to Jerusalem to the mother church which was born on the Day of Pentecost about 20 years earlier.

Paul probably celebrated the feast of the Passover while in Jerusalem before he went down to Antioch in Syria—to the church from which he and Barnabas had been commissioned on the first missionary journey (Acts 13:2, 3) and from which he and Silas had embarked on the second missionary journey (Acts 15:40).

The text says he went up to Jerusalem and from Jerusalem he went down to Antioch. In this case ‘up’ was to the south and ‘down’ was to the north. For us ‘down’ means ‘to the south.’ We speak of going down to Atlanta and up to Green Bay—though I can’t figure why anyone would want to go up there in the fall or winter. In the Bible any direction away from Jerusalem was called “down.”

So Paul’s second missionary journey ended at Antioch, and his third began there.

<sup>23</sup> *After spending some time in Antioch, Paul set out from there and traveled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.*

Paul probably spent just the winter months in Antioch. Then he was off again, this time to visit the places where he had preached the gospel on his first missionary journey with Barnabas. He went to strengthen and encourage the churches he had started.

<sup>24</sup> *Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures.*

A Jew named Apollos. That’s strange, like a Swede named Mohammed. It wasn’t very common that a Jew would be named after a pagan Roman deity, Apollo.

He was a native of Alexandria in North Africa, one of the most influential metropolitan centers in the world.

Apollos had “a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures.” It says, literally he was ‘*powerful in the Scriptures.*’ (v.24)

The power was in the Scriptures. Paul wrote, ‘*I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes, first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.*’ (Romans 1:16)

This gospel is also called the word of God or the word of truth, as Paul wrote later to the church at Ephesus: ‘*And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation.*’ (Ephesians 1:13)

Apollos was powerful in the Scriptures, but he did not know about the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost when the church was born.

<sup>25</sup> *He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John.*

<sup>26</sup> *He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.*

Priscilla and Aquila explained the fullness of the gospel to Apollos.

He was passionate about Jesus Christ, and people paid attention when he spoke.

A few years ago the RCA Company used to advertize its products under the slogan, *Technology that excites the senses.*

The gospel of Jesus Christ had captivated Apollos. It excited his senses. Verse 25 says literally that he spoke ‘*burning in spirit.*’

- Apollos was a gifted speaker. He was bold and he explained things clearly. But natural skills and talents on their own are worthless in the work of God. People’s lives are transformed and true churches are born by the power of the gospel (Rom. 1:16), the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8), the authority of Christ (Matt. 28:18), and the working of God (Phil. 2:13 ‘*for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.*’)

The infant church in Ephesus received tremendous impetus from the Spirit-filled, passionate, powerful preaching and teaching of Apollos.

The Lord God gave Apollos a huge role in the birth and early growth of that church.

I’m convinced that every church that is born and stays spiritually vital has a powerful, passionate preaching and teaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ at its very core—just as at Ephesus.

[<sup>3</sup>rd characteristic essential to a church]

### **III. THE GOSPEL EXALTS JESUS CHRIST (18:28)**

The national anthem exalts the United States of America. That’s what it’s about. That’s what it’s for.

The gospel exalts Jesus Christ, crucified and raised from the dead. That must always be number one—first in importance.

The Apostle wrote, *‘For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,’* (1 Corinthians 15:3-4)

That’s how the church at Ephesus was born and kept on living—by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

If the gospel is absent in the teaching and preaching of any church, you need have no doubt that the church is dead.

- We don’t know how long Apollos stayed in Ephesus with Aquila and Priscilla,. We know that by the time he moved on there was a community of believers that encouraged him on his new assignment.

<sup>27</sup> *When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. On arriving, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed.*

Apollos went to Corinth in the province of Achaia.

He became extremely popular as a speaker and Bible teacher. People flocked to hear him. Some even developed an unhealthy dependence on him for their spiritual identity.

Immature Christians compared him with Paul, and factions developed in the church. (see 1 Corinthians 1:10-12; 3:1-7)

Apollos was probably a better preacher than a pastor at Corinth.

He was adrenalized about introducing people to Jesus Christ the Savior.

<sup>28</sup> *For he vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.*

God used someone who had the ability to reason and to debate with people about the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Jews who wanted to discredit Jesus Christ as the Messiah, were not able to resist the force of Apollos’s arguments and his presentation of evidence about Jesus Christ.

- Our message is about Jesus Christ, and any presentation of the gospel must engage a person’s mind.

We must always present the truth about Jesus Christ in such a way that people understand the truth, no matter how young or how old they are.

If the message is nothing more than some stories that stir emotions in people, the feelings will vanish in short order. Coming to true faith in Jesus Christ and becoming part of an authentic church takes more than a temporary religious high.

- This is why I provide transcripts of my sermons. I want to do my utmost to engage the understanding of people in the truths of God’s word. They can read and listen at the same time, if they want to.

In a church that is alive and well the gospel exalts Jesus Christ and makes him known.

God had plans for Ephesus. It would become a hub of gospel outreach.

The church at Ephesus would become a center of Christian faith for Asia Minor. The church had to be founded on a solid foundation of gospel truth.

Forty years later this church at Ephesus was still a bastion of truth, persevering in truth and able to recognize anything false (Revelation 2:2-3). They hated heresies (Revelation 2:6)

- Our church is 123 years old, and it is a gospel church. Our name is ‘Evangelical.’

How long have you been part of this church? Do you still ‘burn in spirit’ for the gospel of Jesus Christ? Did you ever?

All across America people go to church every weekend. Many of them are very busy in programs and projects they call ‘ministries.’ But do they still think about the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Have you ever paid close attention to the gospel of Jesus Christ? Do you understand the truth of the good news of Jesus Christ? Has it ever stirred your soul to put your faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior? I know of no good reason why you can’t do that right now.