

A God worth knowing

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Written By: **Phil Wheeler**

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What do you expect will happen as Jesus is preached in your local city over the next year? Are you hopeful or pessimistic about what will happen? A rough estimate of the churches in my local area suggests that over 1000 sermons will be preached this year alone. Not to mention the evangelistic events we've planned and so on. But how confident are we really about this work? What do we think will happen? Will people be saved? What fruit can we expect for our gospel labours? In answer, let's consider Acts 19-20, and what can we learn from the reactions which Paul's preaching received.

Whenever the gospel is preached there results always one of two reactions: conflict or confession. There will always be either those who reject the gospel message, and those who listen to the message. There will always be those whose eyes are blinded to the gospel, and those who willingly confess Jesus as Lord, and who turn from wickedness to trust in him. And we see both of these reactions in Paul's day.

[**Conflict**]

In the earliest days of Paul's preaching he found conflict- some become abstinent, refusing to believe and attempted to malign the way causing Paul to find a new venue in the hall of Tyrannus (19:8-10). After two years of daily preaching in this new venue Paul faced once again great opposition, this time forcing him to leave town when a riotous mob rushed the theatre mobbing his travelling companions and refusing to let Paul speak (19:21-41). The problem was that Paul's message was starting to cost the town's idol businesses money. So many had been converted by Paul's gospel preaching that it was starting to effect the demand for the silversmith's religious idols. It seems they were happy to have Christians around as long as they caused little impact on society - but as soon as their message starts to impact society, well, then it is unacceptable. And it's as true today as it was in Paul's day - when the gospel is preached, when the gospel starts to impact people, one of the reactions we can expect to face is conflict.

[**Confession**]

Clearly conflict was not the only reaction to the gospel. A second reaction to Paul's preaching was one of confession. Many believed the message of the Lord Jesus, indeed, so many that it came to effect the economy of Ephesus. God's word so powerfully impacted the society of Ephesus through the ministry of Paul that not only did converted magicians publicly renounce and burn a great wealth of their pagan magic books, but the name of the Lord Jesus came to be held in high honour (19:19-20). Clearly the gospel had a profound impact in Paul's day.

[**And what should we expect?**]

And what should we expect in our day? We shouldn't be surprised when we get maligned in our local newspaper, nor be surprised when we are misrepresented in the media, ridiculed by friends, when families are fractured because the gospel is spoken, or when our church signs are targeted for vandalism. We shouldn't be surprised when conflict occurs. It happened to Paul, it happened to the great preachers of the 18th Century like Wesley and Whitefield, and of course, it happened to Jesus when he spoke the truth and the world did not want to know him. So much so, they put him to death.

But do we also expect to see the other response? Do we actually expect that this year people will become Christians? Do we expect that God will be at work through his word, and to that end are we prayerful, hopeful, and expectantly labouring? I wonder if sometimes we have lost a little of that expectancy - that God will this year bring people to Him, to trust in Him, and conform their lives to His gospel. If so, we need to pray that God will restore and maintain our hope and confidence in his preached and powerful gospel word which we speak. For it is His power for the salvation of all who believe.

[**So what can we learn?**]

First, the importance of proclaiming God's word. That is at the very heart of Paul's ministry. See how he describes his work in Acts 20:18-21:

"You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews. You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and to have faith in our Lord Jesus."

Paul sought to teach the whole council of God. The word of God preached and spoken was at the very heart of what Paul was about - not the miracles that he did, not any clever strategy he may have had, not his gifts, nor his eloquent style, but rather the word of God was his main focus. This he urges, exhorts, argues and persuades - it is a reasoned message that engages the minds of people and their thinking and impacts their whole life. Paul says many were persuaded. That the truth understood will then flow through to people's hearts, wills and actions. Sometimes it will bring conflict, but under God we prayerfully hope that it will actually bring life, salvation and faith in people.

Second, the importance of persistence. Paul was no one-day wonder in Ephesus. There was no 'quick mission' here. In Corinth he had spoken for two years and here in Ephesus for three years. How many sermons would that have been? He'd by this time been on the road for 18 years as a missionary, and was to give another decade of service before he was killed. Are we, like Paul, in for the long haul? Will we persist in this work? And it is hard work, no doubt about that, so we need to pray that God will give us the strength to keep going in the hard times.

Finally, the importance of people. People mattered to Paul. Every one of Paul's letters is marked by his personal concern and love for people. He poured himself out at great personal cost because to him the gospel mattered, and because people mattered. In his farewell speech in Acts 20:28 Paul insists that pastors and elders follow his example:

"Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood."

Wouldn't it be a tragedy if after all the years of preaching and establishing our ministry, if after all that work, it crumbled in a heap because of divisions, because of ungodliness, because of false teaching, because we had grown weary of watching ourselves and watching over the flock we have been entrusted with? Paul knew the importance of preaching, and the importance of persistence, no matter the reaction, precisely because he knew how much people matter to his master. So let's pray we do the same.

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Phil Wheeler pastors at St Matthias Church, Paddington, located in Sydney's Eastern Suburbs.

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