

Current Thoughts

from Dwight's corner

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We always begin our staff meetings with a Bible study. For some time now we have been going verse-by-verse using the **Acts of the Apostles**. Last week we read **Acts** 20:1-6, near the end of Paul's Third Missionary Journey.

That text tells us in just a very few words that the riot in Ephesus has calmed down. Paul proceeds to Macedonia and then South in to Greece. After several months, he decides to go back toward Ephesus.

After telling us very little, the story gets unexpectedly detailed. We are given a roll call of travelling companions.

We often have the impression that the great Apostle Paul wandered about the Mediterranean world with perhaps two or three companions. But it is clear from this passage that Paul had gathered a fairly large group of fellow travelers—large enough to divide into two groups which plan to meet in Troas (on the West coast of Turkey, North of Ephesus).

Seven men are named that accompany Paul, and the unnamed group which plans to meet them is referred to as "us," implying that Luke (the traditional author of **Acts**) is among them.

Not only is this a group of significant size, their names and home towns say something about the men travelling with Paul. Most are Greek names (which does not necessarily mean they were "Greek" proper), but two of them (Sopater and Aristarchus) are names with roots in historic Greek literature and science. Two other names are commonly of Roman origin (Secundus and Gaius). We know that Timothy is "biracial"—he Jewish on his mother's side, but his father is presumably Roman.

This band of travelers has come together from different places. Three (Sopater, Aristarchus, Secundus) come from towns within a 50 mile radius in Macedonia. Others come from across the Aegean. One (Gaius) comes from a very small town in the Lystra valley of Galatia; one (Timothy) is traditionally from Lystra itself; and two (Tychicus and Trophimus) have unspecified origins in "Asia."

Paul did not travel alone. Further, the widespread diversity of those who travelled with him came from a variety of ethnic/cultural origins as well as geographic "home towns." Paul himself, you will remember, was a highly educated Jew, with "Greek" roots in Tarsus, a major metropolis near the Northeast limit of the Mediterranean.

There are some lessons here for us.

Yet again we are reminded that Christianity is not a solo sport.

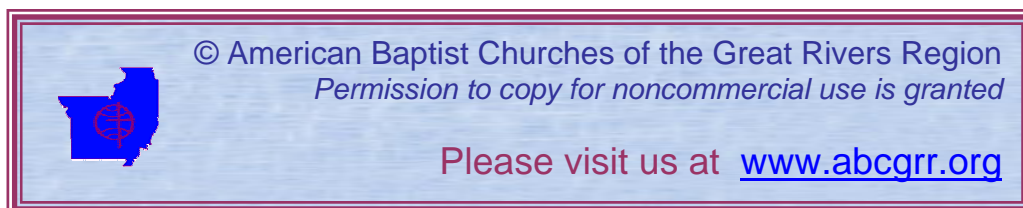
There are admittedly pragmatic reasons for traveling as a group, such as safety in numbers, or Paul's desire to train church leaders, or to meet psychological needs. The same could be said for the way Jesus gathered disciples around him. But I am absolutely persuaded that there is more to it than that. The Christian faith is about God forming and calling to Godself a people, not merely a bunch of isolated, unrelated "believers" doing their own thing. While Christianity is deeply personal, it cannot be reduced to the private. As I have read somewhere, Christ calls us one by one, but never leaves us there. When we neglect, diminish or dismiss the corporate, communal nature of Christianity we pervert it. The Church as the gathered People of God, living in *koinonia*, is just as much a non-negotiable as "God was in Christ reconciling the world."

In particular, we are reminded that ministerial leadership is not a one-man, or one-woman, show. Reading the New Testament, it is hard not to get the impression that Paul was a pretty aggressive leader. But even he did not do it alone. He always had companions with him.

The great temptation of pastoral leadership is to try to go it alone. Not only is this a betrayal of the communal nature of Christianity, it is dangerous behavior for the leader. Our *bona fide* experience of a personal call gets perverted into a private call. We hear no voice but our own. We assume responsibilities beyond the capabilities of our feeble frame. Time and again we have seen how church leaders who try to do it on their own get into serious trouble that is usually self-destructive. Often it includes serious moral failure. I am sure that Christ weeps over those who have destroyed themselves, damaged others, and discredited the Church only because they were determined to do it on their own.

Finally, the gathering of the ethnically and geographically diverse travelling companions demonstrates the truth that "if Christ be lifted up, He will draw all to Himself." No, Paul does not satisfy our modern American expectations of diversity. There are no Irish or Maoris travelling with him. There are no named women. We know nothing of ages or economic backgrounds. But none of this detracts of the truth that in Christ, "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female." If the Church is "in Christ," then this will be reflected in the traveling companions.

Do you have travelling companions?



Once again, it is the end of the year and I report some of my reading. From the 51 books I read in 2008, I urge your consideration of:

Craig Groeschel **How Churches and Leaders can get IT and keep IT** Zondervan: Grand Rapids MI, 2008.

Judith Schwanz **Blessed Connections: Relationships that Sustain Ministry** Alban: Herndon VA, 2008.

Paul Louis Metzger **Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Divisions in a Consumer Church** Eerdmans: Grand Rapids MI, 2007

N.T. Wright **Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church** HarperOne: San Francisco CA, 2008

Andrew Purves **The Crucifixion of Ministry: Surrendering Our Ambitions to the Service of Christ** InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove IL, 2007.