

Acts 20:1-12 Signs of life in a God-centred church

Introduction

What kind of indicators are there within a church to suggest that it is in a spiritually healthy state? Or conversely what things would point to the opposite conclusion that a congregation was in need of a spiritual health check to restore its vitality towards God and the community it is called to serve? It is always helpful to keep in mind the kind of church we ought to be if we are to glorify God and honour Him as we should as a people redeemed by the sacrificial death on the cross by His Son Jesus Christ. We thank God that in the United Kingdom overall there has been growth in church attendance overall over the last three years –the first time this has occurred for the best part of a hundred years. Yet this has occurred principally in England, with only pockets of growth in Scotland. We have a huge mission-field around us of people who need to come to know Jesus and experience the life transformation that He wants to bring to their lives. However, so many people have been brought up in families that have had no meaningful contact with a church for several generations and have lost the knowledge of what we believe and stand for and how they can come and experience the blessings of the Christian faith for themselves. Others in our community had some limited contact in their childhood and though they never actually rejected the faith –simply drifting away when other things took a higher priority in their lives, reconnecting with them is a major challenge for us. I believe that a spiritually healthy church where its congregation is seeking to live out the faith in practical ways, will attract people who are seeking after God and who will want to join us in our journey of faith. We have had many blessings over recent years, but the Lord has even more in store for us if we keep our eyes on Him and keep focussed on the biblical goals and values He has set out for us in His Word.

1. Genuine love within the fellowship (Acts 20:1)

(a)Starting where we are (Acts 20:1a) *When the uproar had ended...*The city has been experiencing a riot of thousands of angry people shouting and milling around in the centre of its business district. It is in turmoil. The old order and way of doing things is in the throes of passing away, but whatever is coming has not yet arrived –like the situation in North Africa and the Middle East throughout January and February 2011. It can be like that sometimes in church life as well when changes need to be made, but while there may be agreement on what will not continue there is less clarity on what will take its place. It can happen in our personal lives – a major health situation, an unexpected redundancy in the workplace or a whole range of other issues that arise and we wonder what is the Lord trying to say to me through this set of circumstances that may have arisen as part of the natural ups and downs of life on earth, but as Christians we recognise that obstacles across our pathway are also opportunities to ask the Lord afresh for guidance and direction into the future. This time was a poignant moment for Paul. He has spent possibly as long as three years on his third missionary journey in Ephesus and will be setting off for a lengthy trip to Jerusalem (Acts 21:17), that somehow would result in a trip to Rome. He had presumably shared this plan of action with his closest colleagues, as Luke records it in Acts 19:21: *After all this had happened, Paul decided to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia. After I have been there, he said, I must visit Rome also.* It is probable that Luke sees a parallel between Jesus' journey to Jerusalem to fulfil His calling, recorded in his *Gospel*, and Paul's likewise, in his second book the *Acts of*

the Apostles. [John Stott, Acts, p.315] **(i)** Paul like Jesus travelled to Jerusalem with a group of his closest disciples (Acts 20:4); **(ii)** like Jesus hostile Jews were continually plotting to harm or even kill him (Acts 20:3, 19); **(iii)** like Jesus he made or received three successive predictions of the suffering that lay ahead of him (Acts 20:22-23 *And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there.* ²³ *I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.* 21:4: *through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem;* and 21:11 Agabus's prophetic word), **(iv)** including his being handed over to the Gentiles: 21:11: *Coming over to us, [Agabus] took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, The Holy Spirit says, 'In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.'* **(v)** Paul, again like Jesus, expressed his readiness to lay down his life and that nothing should deflect from it (Acts 20:24: *However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me— the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.* Acts 21:13: *Then Paul answered, Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.* I don't know how many years I have left to serve the Lord –neither do you? Too often because our health is good and our circumstances okay we assume (often correctly to be fair) we have many similar years to come –but we can never presume that to be the case. With the mix of life circumstances that we may experience we need one another; to support each other and together to accomplish the goals He has set before us. We must keep our eyes fixed on Jesus if this is to take place. (b) **Intentional support for one another** (Acts 20:1b) *Paul sent for the disciples and, after encouraging them, said good-bye and set out for Macedonia.* The principle of loving and caring for one another by our words and through our actions could only be denied by individuals who wanted to live in complete isolation from other people. However, when we all lead busy lives it is often only when we plan ahead of time to show Christ-like love in practical ways, that it actually happens. We can think I should do...but the moment passes because so many other 'must do' things appear on the horizon! Paul here at Ephesus in his remaining hours would have been restricted to using words, but followers of Christ are called to model agape (practical care) love as he provides opportunities for us. I am not necessarily thinking here exclusively or primarily of activities organised officially by the church, it may be something you do privately unknown to other people. I am so pleased when I hear of people in this church showing that love for the Lord, through their love to other Christians in the church and beyond it. At many Christian weddings Paul's words in I Corinthians 13 about Christian love are read. This is good and appropriate; likewise they are equally applicable to every other relationship in our lives, to a different degree. However, our role model is always the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul, in Philippians 2:1-5, issued this challenge to that first century church and to us: *If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion,² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.⁴ Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.⁵ Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.* This means in practice –do the words I want to say to my brother or sister in Christ encourage and build them up or have the opposite effect? Does this action I am contemplating serve to enhance Christ's kingdom or diminish it? If we think in these

terms in our congregational life, and in similar ways in other contexts, our impact on other people will be constructive and helpful, rather than destructive and harmful.

2. Commitment to relationships with other churches (Acts 20:2-6)

(a) Interdependence amongst the churches (Acts 20:2-3) *He travelled through that area, speaking many words of encouragement to the people, and finally arrived in Greece, ³ where he stayed three months. Because the Jews made a plot against him just as he was about to sail for Syria, he decided to go back through Macedonia.* A local congregation, in New Testament terms is autonomous, that is responsible under God for conducting its own affairs without outside interference or control. However, a New Testament church is not an independent cause, rather it is consciously in fellowship with other local autonomous congregations. It is, therefore, not merely making pious statements about its relationship with other Christian churches, but taking active steps to show that unity in practical ways. In New Testament times Paul and his colleagues made repeated trips from one church to another to encourage their members in the faith. In days before modern communications this kind of intensive visitation was essential, especially when all these congregations were relatively new churches. What should this look like today? **(i)** Every local church should under God decide which network of churches it ought to affiliate with. Our church has been a longstanding member of the Baptist Union of Scotland on the grounds that the core principles and values for which we stand is best articulated by the Baptist understanding of New Testament church life. Every year we give a generous sum of money to the home mission fund to support sister churches who have more limited resources; to provide funds for new church-planting ventures; and amongst other things to support our national leaders and support workers in the office in Aytoun Road, Glasgow. **(ii)** Each local congregation, in addition, should have worked out its relationships with other churches in the village, town or city in which it is located. There is no one blueprint for determining how these decisions are taken, as each local setting will be different. In our case many years ago this church decided to join the Broughty Ferry Churches Group and participate in a number of its initiatives such as Lent studies or Holy week services and an annual pulpit exchange. Although the nature of these commitments has changed over the years the core principles remain the same. Likewise, when the Dundee Evangelical Christian Association was formally constituted three years ago in Central Baptist church, I had the honour of being one of the sixteen signatories on the covenant, representing that number of Evangelical congregations in Dundee. All participating churches must be in agreement with the Evangelical Alliance statement of faith. **(iii)** The world is a much smaller place than it used to be, in terms of communications and travel. Over the last hundred years Scottish Baptists have played a significant part in funding evangelistic work and church-planting initiatives in Europe. Our decision to support Igor and Anita and their church in Ruma is in line with that visionary commitment of previous generations of Scottish Baptists. Our Baptist Union plays as large a part as funds allow within the European Baptist Federation. On the biggest stage are the international networks of churches, for example, the Baptist World Alliance. I have the honour of having been re-elected to serve on the History and Heritage Commission of that body, alongside fifty other colleagues, together with over 400 additional men and women in the other branches of our world communion. In addition to church-based fellowship ties we support various mission societies, not least our own Baptist Missionary Society. The task of reaching the world for Jesus Christ in our generation is one we own, but equally one we share with brothers and sisters in Christ from every region of the globe, and from a vast array of different Christian traditions.

(b) Teamwork amongst the church leaders (Acts 20:4-6) ⁴ *He was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy*

also, and Tychicus and Trophimus from the province of Asia.⁵ These men went on ahead and waited for us at Troas.⁶ But we sailed from Philippi after the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and five days later joined the others at Troas, where we stayed seven days. Good relationships between churches are usually linked with strong ties between the respective leadership teams. It is the responsibility of pastors in particular to cultivate relationships with their colleagues. There is no prescriptive guide to carrying this out, but fraternals are a good place to begin. There we can listen to each others' stories and pray for each other, not just on the day, but at other times as appropriate. Tayside Baptist Ministers' Fraternal normally meets on our church premises once a month; most other ministers' fellowships take place with a similar frequency. Working with other church leaders in God's work serves to remind us that we are not on our own and that together we can accomplish far more than would be possible on our own. The funding and support provision for bringing Bethany to Dundee last month, happened because the DECA churches collectively determined to support this initiative. As a result, a task that might have been beyond almost all the individual churches was fairly easily attainable with the support of twenty or so congregations. We are building God's kingdom not our own. This can be forgotten sometimes in churches, but it is a simple statement of fact. The challenge always before us is this: will what I want to do enhance and strengthen God's kingdom in this community or will it make it less effective in transforming people's lives? Paul and his colleagues made a point of keeping close ties between the churches and each other, both for prayer and also because of a genuine love and care for one another. This is a good role model for twenty-first century Christians.

3. **A heart for worship at the centre of the fellowship** (Acts 20:7)

We have to be careful not to be too prescriptive about using information from Acts for our church life when Luke may be simply describing what took place in a particular congregation at a particular time. So, for example from Troas, we would be wrong to conclude that church services should be held only in upper rooms, with a large number of oil lamps providing light and heat, with sermons that go on into the early hours, or even dawn after a refreshment break! There are clearly elements of proceedings here that are exceptional, rather than their normal practice. However, it is likely that we can gain some details from this occasion about the normal pattern of Christian worship in the Early Church. There were first of all:

(a) **Regular gatherings** *On the first day of the week we came together* The hallmarks of the followers of Jesus included Sunday meetings. Jewish followers of Jesus continued also to observe the Jewish religious practices on the Sabbath (Friday sundown to Saturday sundown) for at least another generation and possibly longer; however, distinctive Christian worship services were held on the day on which all the dated resurrection appearances took place – Sunday. They understood that this day was to be special for Christians –although it did not become a day of rest from work in the Roman Empire until the reign of Constantine the Great in the fourth century AD. These first Christians made a big effort to see that nothing would prevent them meeting with fellow believers each Sunday. As a result of serious persecution some Italian believers grew discouraged and were less regular in their attendance at church. The letter to the Hebrews was written to them to encourage them in their faith. It included these words: *And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, ²⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching* (Hebrews 10:24-25). If they could normally get their priorities right under persecution in the Roman world then we can be expected to do the same in the free society we benefit from in twenty-first century Scotland. I trust we can share the attitude of David in Psalm 122 when he wrote: *I rejoiced with those who said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord."*

(b) **Communion** to break bread. From the limited number of sources we have it appears that the followers of Jesus met on Sunday mornings, prior to going to work at 6am, the start of the working day! If a service was of an evangelistic nature then this is the one to which an outsider would have been invited! After the conclusion of the working day for free people at 12 noon, and allowing a longer time for the many slaves who became Christians, the community of believers gathered in the home that they used as a church for a meal –possibly the one meal of the day for the slaves and poorest members of the congregation. This was an important act of fellowship and a statement of their oneness in Christ. Once that was concluded, the central focus of the worship service was communion. It was, therefore, this occasion at Troas that provided a fitting conclusion to the week that the apostle spent with these young Christians. Baptism is something believers carry out once; partaking of the Lord's Supper is something we repeat regularly *until He comes* (I Corinthians 11:26). Why do we do this? (i) It is a reminder of the wonderful love of God to us. (ii) It is a constant statement of the cost of our redemption –it cost Jesus His life to reconcile us to God; (iii) It is a declaration of provision of God for His people. Romans 8:31-32: *What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?* (iv) It is lastly a challenge that our time here as His witnesses is limited between the two comings of Jesus. It also is a warning that the second time He will come as king of kings and Lords of Lord to judge the world and usher in the end of the age. If God in Christ fulfilled the promises relating to His first coming then we can be even more certain that His second coming will take place as He said. And that it will take place when we do not expect it –be ready (Matthew 25:13)!

(c) **Bible teaching** Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight. The vocabulary Luke uses to describe Paul's ministry here combines teaching and dialogue –so no need to picture a marathon sermon of eight hours duration! The time would have passed quickly as they eagerly sought information about Jesus and the Christian faith. As an undergraduate student I shared a flat for a year with a fellow Christian theology student. On one special occasion we hosted a visiting lecturer who had spoken at our college. This man was one of the greatest living authorities on the background in the Ancient Near East and knew the languages of the peoples mentioned in the Bible. From the respectable time we got back to our flat from the evening event. We spent till 6am asking questions and hearing amazing answers about a whole range of Old Testament background issues. He lived in that world and brought it alive. You could almost picture being there it was an unforgettable occasion. A God-centred, Christ-honouring, Spirit empowered church will be hungry for God's Word. It will be central in our thinking; decisive in its guidance on issues on which it speaks; entirely trustworthy and reliable, because it was uniquely inspired by almighty God. Is this how you view God's Word? For Jesus, for example, when tempted by Satan, He declared: *it is written* (Matthew 4:1-11) followed by quotations from the Bible to silence the evil one. It is our one spiritual offensive weapon- all the other parts of the armour of God (Ephesians 6:10-20) are defensive. Treasure it personally and store it in your mind and hide it in your heart. It is the very Word of the glorious God we love and serve!

4. **A vision for the transformation of lives within the fellowship** (Acts 20:8-12)

⁸ *There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were meeting.*⁹ *Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third storey and was picked up dead.*¹⁰ *Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. Don't be alarmed, he said. He's alive!*¹¹ *Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate. After talking until daylight, he left.*¹²

The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted. Apparently the word used to describe Eutychus' age was normally used of boys aged eight to fourteen years. The setting is in an upper room that would have been very hot and stuffy with fumes from the oil lamps that gave light to the people present. This young man has got a privileged seat next to a window where the air will be fresher –and in an age before the average home had glass in the windows he is in close proximity to a sizable hole in the wall! It has been a busy day. He is most likely to have been at work with his parents, up well before 6am and the same again on Monday morning. Its not really a surprise that he is asleep by midnight. His name means 'good fortune'. Therefore, it is likely that his parents were Gentile converts to Christianity, rather than of Jewish ancestry. A sudden gasp goes round the room as this young man falls out of the third floor window onto a solid path and after a quick examination is pronounced dead. Paul laid hands on him and apparently his life returns and he is able to go home within a few hours in pretty reasonable shape. What is incredible to us is that the congregation troops back upstairs and carries on with the service, which by then had got to the communion. It had got so late that sleep was given a miss that night and they all had breakfast before most of the people went for work and Paul and his companions set off on the next stage of their journey. The miracle here is extraordinary and by definition rare. Yet this is our God also. This is also the message we share with people in our generation, one that can transform their lives as it has ours. I trust we can say with Paul: *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile* (Romans 1:16). Luke in these few verses has given us some glimpses of life in a God-centred church; may something of that reality be our witness and experience in this place in the coming days, for Jesus' sake, Amen.