

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

Info: (651) 283-0568 Discipleship Training Ministries, Inc. www.dtminc.org Today's Date: January 17, 2021

Revival Fires!

by Dan Trygg

“...our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of people we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶ You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers... ⁸ For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, ...in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything.

1 Thessalonians 1:5-8

The so-called “Roman captivity of the church” was a pall upon the intended dynamics of the people of God, but it was never able to smother the work of the Spirit at work in people’s hearts. *Throughout history, there were repeated, and sometimes extensive, revival fires that were kindled afresh by men and women whose hearts cried out to God.* In every age, and in every generation, there have always been people who *thought there is more, longed for more, sought for more, ...and were heard by God.* He responded to their cries, and opened their eyes and hearts.

Before going there, however, let’s trace some church history. **From the birth of the Jesus movement until 313 A.D., Christianity was somewhat of an anomaly. It was a largely grassroots movement, meeting in homes or in secluded places, and pretty much staying out of the public eye.** To draw undue attention to itself was to invite trouble. Roman leaders could, and did, demand oaths of loyalty and sacrifices to the emperor or to pagan gods, to test the loyalty of the believers. To not comply could mean confiscation of property, beatings, imprisonment, enslavement, torture or death. So, **it was in the interest of the Christians to keep a somewhat low public profile, while continuing to share their faith by word of mouth, through demonstrations of miraculous signs and answers to prayer, and by acts of service, kindness and love.** There were some apostolic and evangelistic preachers, who went about proclaiming the good news, but the *proclamation was usually accompanied with the demonstration of God’s power and the transformation of the lives of those who trusted in Christ.*

Church meetings were informal, interactive gatherings of believers (not outsiders) **in homes.** They met to read the scriptures, learn the doctrine of the apostles, remember Jesus’ death through the Lord’s supper (where they symbolically took His life into themselves, as an expression of their oneness with Him and with each other) followed by a common meal. During the meal they shared with each other their news, their concerns, their needs. **Afterwards, they ministered to one another in prayer and with the gifts of the Spirit.** *Everyone* was a viable, important participant. *All* were welcome to share, as long as it was edifying. **Everyone learned to experience the reality and power of God at work from others to them, and then through them to others.** They all learned to be “doers of the Word”.

This all changed virtually overnight in 313 A.D. With the Edict of Milan, the Roman emperor, Constantine, granted Christianity legal status as a tolerated religion within the empire. Furthermore, **he began an “emperor-sized” campaign to promote Christianity by using tax money to build meeting places for Christians to meet.** These followed the design of other multi-use public buildings. They were oblong rectangular buildings with a high roof over a central nave, and side aisles with lower roofs and windows. They were called a “basilica”, meaning “royal”, or “of the king”. **These large, oblong buildings could seat a large number of people, but the dynamics of the Christian meeting changed from being an intimate, interactive, very warm and personal gathering to being a formal, non-interactive meeting, where people were not expected, encouraged, or permitted, to participate.** Part of what hastened the acceptance of these new surroundings was not only the change in the legal status of the Christians, but also the fact that **many pagans could see the interest of the emperor, and rushed to attend Christian gatherings to curry favor with him.** So, **these meetings, unlike the church in the homes, were filled with non-believers or inquirers.** The preachers in the church could see the opportunity that was presenting itself, so they focused on proclaiming the good news. They could not possibly feed all these people, so **they dispensed with the common meal, and focused on preaching, the Lord’s supper and prayer.**

Then, in 380 A.D. the emperor Theodosius issued the Edict of Thessalonica, which made the Christian religion the official religion of the Roman Empire, and outlawed all other pagan religions and practices. While this might seem to be a good thing, **it drove pagan religion underground, and inundated Christian “basilicas” with even more ignorant, uninstructed and unconverted people.** The possibility of an interactive fellowship of equal, Spirit-led believers was virtually impossible in most gatherings of “the church”. Preaching focused on proclaiming basic Bible truths. **It was also at this time that the theology of the mass, the use of incense, vestments (special garb for religious officiants), and special lighting began to creep into basilica gatherings.** The teaching of the mass was that the bread

and wine of the Lord's supper literally turned into Jesus' body and blood, and were offered afresh as a sacrifice for sin. It became a critical part of the meeting to go forward to receive "the host" (Latin: *hostia*; lit. 'sacrificial victim'). It was thought that receiving this would cleanse and strengthen the worshiper to go forth and offer themselves as a sacrifice in service to others. **Because the rich and powerful attended basilica gatherings in their fine clothing, others, too, began to wear their best clothing.** The poor and unclean were marginalized, and the rich and powerful were given places of prominence. **There was no place for the "real church"** (the intimate, *unadorned*, interactive gathering of equals, the *ekklēsia* Jesus had envisioned), in the adorned, formalized, liturgical, spectator-ized, marginalized gatherings of *unequals* that were meeting **in the basilicas known as "churches" all across the Roman Empire.**

The worst, and most horrifying development of the Edict of Thessalonica was that it gave legal power to outlaw and persecute any religious teachings or practices that were not consistent with the Nicene Creed. Any other beliefs were branded as "heretical" and were open to censorship, punishment and persecution. **This put the power of the state into partnership with the church, and horrific things were done in the name of Christ!** While this edict was not specifically written to correct other matters of disagreement between the officially-sanctioned church and other expressions of legitimate Christian faith, **it was not long before the power of the state was being used by corrupt or arrogant church leaders to attack and persecute grassroots, informal, leaven-like, ekklēsia-like meetings of people rediscovering Body-life in the Holy Spirit.** Such people were often viewed as a threat to the hierarchy of the basilica-style religious leaders. They were branded as "heretics" and stamped out. Many of these groups have disappeared from the historical record. Jan Hus, Peter Waldo, and John Wycliffe were some 12th and 13th century reformers.

Just as God set the stage for the coming of Jesus and the preaching of the gospel message, ...by establishing the Greek language as the language of trade and commerce all over the area from Italy to India, and down into Egypt, and the establishment of the Roman Empire, with its network of well-built and protected roads, and the political sovereignty that allowed for easy travel anywhere within the Roman Empire..., in a similar way, **He was setting the stage for a revival and reformation that would break His people free from the oppressive control of the Roman church, and set them on a path to rediscover His Word, His plan and the power of the Spirit.**

After 1,000 years of religious control and domination of the religious dynamics instituted by Constantine's influence, **God began to break up the hardened ground in order to plant seeds of a whole new movement in Western Christendom. There were numerous aspects to this. There was a general questioning of authority,** when it became apparent that the Roman Church was trying to deny and suppress knowledge that could be seen and documented by human observation. The whole controversy over Copernicus' heliocentric view of the solar system, versus the earth-centered view had much larger ramifications than science itself. The church had placed itself as the gatekeeper of truth, ...and it had become apparent that it did not have that power. This opened up many other areas of inquiry and questioning. **Another key aspect was a rediscovery and focus on ancient Greek texts,** including the text of the NT. The Latin Vulgate had held sway for over 1,000 years, but a careful study of the Greek caused scholars to view familiar passages in a new way, leading to a rediscovery of important truths. **The invention of the printing press** was like the Roman roads and the Greek language of the first century. It meant that the word could get out quickly, be disseminated widely, and that the Bible could even be translated into the common tongue of the people. **The occurrence of the plague, the "black death",** had taken place just a generation before, in the late 1300's, and this again shook the foundations of "the world as we know it". Then, in addition to the general level of well-known, or rumored, corruption and abuses of religious authority within church hierarchy, the 1300's ended with **the Papal Schism,** where *three separate men claimed to be the true pope,* and excommunicated one another. This did not inspire confidence in the religious institution of the papacy. **Finally, some of the political boundaries and strength of character of some individuals set the stage for the survival of Martin Luther,** where other men who had spoken up for reformation were assassinated, or tried and executed by representatives of the Roman Church (notably Jan Hus).

When Martin Luther posted his 95 theses, as topics for discussion and debate, especially dealing with the selling of indulgences, it kicked off a firestorm! In response, Pope Leo X branded him a heretic, and ultimately excommunicated him. When he refused to recant, and it was clear that he would be killed as a heretic, Prince Fredrick III of Saxony had him kidnapped, and hid him in Wartburg castle in disguise, where **he translated the New Testament from Greek into the common German language, so that everyday people could read it.** With the printing press publishing and disseminating his German NT, and numerous pro-reformation pamphlets, the Protestant Reformation began. It was like a wildfire that spread across Europe and over to England. **Luther's translation inspired others to translate the Bible into their own languages,** and **his stand for truth against Roman oppression encouraged others to also defy the abuse of power of the papacy** and the hierarchy of the Roman Church. **As people read the Bible in their own tongue, they met again the power of the Holy Spirit and the full conviction He brings.** Where there was not yet freedom, people began to meet in secret for Bible study and sharing, ...and the fire spread!