

Biblical Evangelism in Action

Psalm 110, Acts 16:11–15

Today we look at the story of Lydia. This is an amazing story for several reasons, not the least of which is that Lydia is the first Christian convert on the continent of Europe. And since Europe essentially gave birth to America, the conversion of Lydia touches us all. In these few verses we will learn about Lydia, but we will learn also of the evangelistic methodology of the apostle Paul. How did Paul go about the work of evangelism? There is much to learn in this text. I have three points this morning, first,

1. Biblical evangelism is carried out by men called by God.

This is part of Paul's second missionary journey. The last verse of the preceding chapter tells us that Paul and his missionary team "went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches." Paul wasn't interested merely in eliciting conversions; he wanted to make sure those who professed Christ were grounded in the faith and enfolded into the church. Who were the men who made up Paul's missionary team? First, Paul himself, the apostle, formerly known by his Jewish name Saul, after the first king of Israel. Brought up in Tarsus, in Asia Minor, he was trained in Jerusalem at the feet of the celebrated rabbi Gamaliel. At first he was a zealous Pharisee and vehement foe of the Christians, but he was converted by a vision of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, where he was going to arrest those who followed Christ. Paul was prominent among the apostles and the human author of a big chunk of the New Testament. His was an amazing conversion, a dramatic about-face. The arch-persecutor of the Christians became an eloquent apologist for the Christian faith and the greatest theologian the world has ever seen. Interestingly, his name, Paul, means *small* or *little*. This could refer to stature—short in height—but in the providence of God it refers to a man of humility, a man who self-consciously declared, "we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor. 4:5). Saul became an apostle at the explicit call of the ascended Christ. As he and the prophets and teachers in the church in Antioch of Syria fasted and prayed, "the Holy Spirit said, 'Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'" In obedience to God the church laid hands on them and sent them out on their first missionary journey.

The second man on the missionary team was Silas. Silas was a respected member of the church at Jerusalem who was prophetically gifted.¹ He is first mentioned in Acts 15 as a member of the Jerusalem council who was sent, along with Paul, Barnabas and Silas, "chief men among the brethren" (Acts 15:22), to deliver the decision of the council to the church at Antioch. After delivering the

¹ Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich lexicon, entry Σίλας

council's decision, Silas stayed on in Antioch (Acts 15:32, 34) and later became Paul's traveling companion.

The third member of the team was Timothy, referred to by Paul as his "son in the faith" (1 Tim. 1:2). Timothy was brought to Christ by his mentor, the apostle Paul. He was "a friend, traveling companion and co-worker of Paul," who "used him permanently as an assistant."² He is named as the co-writer of six of Paul's letters.³ The first letter to the Thessalonians begins, "Paul, Silvanus, and *Timothy*, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." What an honor, to be numbered among the human authors of Scripture! One indication of Paul's trust and confidence in the man Timothy may be seen in 1 Thessalonians 3. When Paul was greatly concerned about the state and condition of the church in Thessalonica, he chose Timothy to travel there from Athens as his emissary to minister to the Thessalonian Christians. Listen to what Paul writes concerning his son in the faith; he says, "we" (an indication of Paul's humility) "sent Timothy, our brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith" (1 Thess. 3:1–2). What a grand commendation: "our *brother* and *minister* of God, and our fellow *laborer* in the gospel." Would that we all might want to be known by these designations! Timothy was a "brother" in Christ, a "minister" (διδάκονος, deacon, the same word used by Christ of himself when he said, "the Son of man came not to be *ministered* unto, but to *minister*, and to give his life a ransom for many," Matt. 20:28). Timothy was also a "fellow laborer." The word for *laborer* refers to a worker. Gospel labor is hard work! There are those who go into the Christian ministry because they think they will have an easy life. But the Christian ministry is not without toil, struggle and even persecution. Paul would write that "we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand" (Eph. 6:12–13). As we proclaim the gospel we must remember that our adversary is not *people*, but demonic forces. Satan's chief goal is to sow discord and division in the Christian church, to try to destroy and neutralize the church's witness. It was Timothy whom Paul chose to send to Thessalonica to establish the church and encourage the saints in their faith. He had confidence in Timothy's character and abilities. So Timothy was no intellectual lightweight. As Paul at the end of his life was passing on the

² Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich lexicon, entry Τιμόθεος

³ Namely 2 Cor. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1; Philemon 1

baton, he would urge Timothy to “be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry” (2 Tim. 4:5).

The fourth member of the team was Luke, a physician and historian, the writer of both the gospel that bears his name and also of the Acts of the apostles. Though we do not know much about his personal life, Luke, too, was no intellectual lightweight, but a man of letters and a man of discernment chosen by the Holy Spirit to write the inspired history of the Christian church.

Hence we see that biblical evangelism in the formal sense is carried out by men called by God, men who have a competent knowledge of Scripture and are qualified to teach and preach the gospel to the glory of Christ and the conversion of the elect. Paul, Silas and Timothy preached as heralds of the King, heralding forth the message of salvation.⁴ But in the informal sense all Christians in the course of their daily life have the authority to share the good news, as witnesses to what God has done in their life. Jesus told the man at Gadara whom he delivered from demon-possession, “Return to your own house, and tell what great things God has done for you” (Luke 8:39). Has he delivered you from spiritual blindness and opened up your eyes to his saving glory? Then you can say, along with the man who was blind from birth, whom Jesus healed: “One thing I know: that though I was blind, now I see” (John 9:25). Has God saved you from your sins and given you the hope of eternal life? Then tell people about it! Tell the great things God has done for you! Secondly, observe that

2. Biblical evangelism proceeds from the assumption that only God can open a heart.

Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke arrived in Philippi. Philippi was a city in Macedonia founded by Philip of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great. The city had been under Roman rule from about 167 BC.⁵ After the missionaries rested from their travel and got acclimated to their surroundings they sought out a women’s prayer group that was meeting on the Jewish Sabbath. We have already seen that Paul’s practice, upon arriving in a city, was to find a synagogue and seek an opportunity to preach Christ to the Jews. He speaks of this in Romans 1:16, where he says, “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew *first* and also for the Greek.” But there was no synagogue in Philippi. A synagogue is a Jewish house of worship. In Judaism a synagogue can be established only if there are ten adult males. The fact that these Jewish women were praying out-of-doors on the Sabbath indicates that there were few Jews in Philippi at the time—not even ten adult males. But here were some women who were keeping up the ancient faith of Israel.

⁴ κηρύσσω: announce, make known by a herald; cf. Rom. 10:8

⁵ Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich lexicon, entry Φίλιπποι

Lydia herself was not Jewish but a proselyte, a convert to Judaism. She was apparently a woman of rank, head of a household, either widowed or unmarried. She had a large enough house to receive Paul and his missionary team. She was a businesswoman, a seller of purple. One writer notes that Lydian purple dye, in which this woman traded, was renowned.⁶ Since Lydia had no husband to support her, necessity required that she go into business. Like Cornelius, “a devout man and one who feared God with all his household” (Acts 10:2), Lydia too was a worshiper of God. But along come the missionaries and inform her that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel. She has never heard this before. The Jewish rulers in Jerusalem emphatically rejected this message. Wouldn’t Lydia reject it too? But she did not. Instead, she received it. Why? Luke gives the reason: “The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul” (v. 14). How does the Lord open a person’s heart? By his Spirit. The Spirit of God is sovereign. He is like a wind blowing where it wishes. “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). We can hear the sound of the wind, and we can feel its power against our bodies. So likewise with the spirit. He is free to operate wherever he will.

Our Old Testament text, Psalm 110, has the members of the blessed Trinity speaking to one another: “The LORD shall send the rod of thy strength out of Zion: rule thou in the midst of thine enemies. Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power.” When the blessed Holy Spirit acts, formerly unwilling hearts become willing!

Because of Adam’s sin, all his posterity are spiritually dead. “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and *death* by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned” (Rom. 5:12). “And you hath he quickened, who were *dead* in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1). All of us by nature are spiritually dead. We are dead in intellect, emotions and will. We do not think God’s thoughts after him, and we adopt the philosophies of the world. We are lovers of self; we are not drawn to love the true God with all our heart. And we do not choose the right way; we invariably choose the wrong way. Norma and I talked with a woman recently whose son was a drug addict for seven years until he eventually died of a drug overdose at the age of 25. Over and over she pled with him to give up his addiction. He knew that it was wrong, but its hold on him was great. Sin’s hold on men and women is indeed strong. In the case of Lydia, she was informed that Jesus was Israel’s long-promised Messiah who came to save his people from their sins. Paul’s missionary team had travel hundreds of miles to come and tell her of God’s great salvation in Christ. And Lydia believed! She was the first convert on the

⁶ B. F. Harris, “Lydia,” in *The New Bible Dictionary* (Logos Bible Software)

continent of Europe. The Lord opened her heart to believe the truth! She didn't receive it merely as an interesting fact, an intellectual curiosity, one philosophy among many. She didn't just say, "Yes, I knew it. There's truth in all religions." No! She *heeded* the things that were spoken by Paul. The word translated "heed" means *to turn one's mind to, to pay attention to, to devote oneself to*. At once Lydia became a devoted follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. She asked for and received baptism. She confessed her faith in Jesus Christ and devoted her life from that moment forward to his service. Her life was radically changed. And this was not just one convert getting baptized. The text tells us that "she and her household were baptized." This was a household baptism. Lydia's children, servants and employees all were baptized too.

God is in the business of saving whole households. He told Abraham, "I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, *to be God to you and your descendants after you*" (Gen. 17:7). Later, the Lord said of him, "I know him, that he will command his children *and his household after him*, and they shall keep the way of the Lord" (Gen. 18:19). Joshua boldly declared, "as for me *and my house*, we will serve the Lord" (Josh. 24:15). The New Testament speaks of the house of Jason, the house of Philip the evangelist, the house of Chloe, the house of Stephanas and the house of Onesiphorus. Indeed, God is in the business of saving whole households. If you grew up in a faithful Christian household, then rejoice! If you did *not* grow up in a faithful Christian household, then pray that God will bless you with one! The Bible teaches that in Christ "all the *families* of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3).

Here is an instance of adult baptism: Lydia was baptized upon profession of faith. The missionary team judged her faith to be credible. Lydia refers to this when she says, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay" (Acts 16:15). She implicitly understood that her giving her testimony to Paul and the other elders was a judgment. Only God can look deep into the human heart and know with perfect certainty whether a person's faith is real or not. The elders of the church cannot look into the hearts of their flock. But the elders in receiving members take their cue from the Lord Jesus, who said that "every tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they gather grapes from a bramble bush. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks" (Luke 6:44–45). There is nothing a session enjoys more than hearing professions of faith. "There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth." How does a session know that a man or woman has a true faith in Christ as Lord? By listening to the words and by evaluating actions. Does the man or woman profess the faith of

Scripture (“I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God”)? And does he or she give evidence of submission to his word and desire to live a life of obedience?

We have considered that biblical evangelism is carried out by men called by God, and that biblical evangelism proceeds from the assumption that only God can open a heart. Thirdly, consider that

3. Biblical evangelism is conducted with the intention of planting churches.

As we are going to see, as we continue through this chapter, not only does God save Lydia and her household, he also will save the Philippian jailer and his household. These two households—along with the slave girl possessed with a spirit of divination, exorcised by Paul—will form the nucleus of the church of Philippi, to which Paul addressed the epistle to the Philippians. Dear saints of God, these are real people, part of the household of faith, brothers and sisters in the faith, whose names are written in heaven. These are people who even now surround the throne of Christ, singing the praises of the Lamb. These are people we will fellowship with through all eternity. Someday we will hear their stories and rejoice in how God brought them to himself.

The church is the household of faith. It includes believers and their children. It is a beautiful thing. Children of believers today receive baptism as the sign and seal of the covenant, just as the male children of believers under the Old Covenant received circumcision as the sign and seal of the covenant. Under the Old Covenant, Israel was the covenant people. The whole household was considered circumcised on the basis of the circumcision of the father. Under the New Covenant, the church, holding to the faith of Abraham, is the covenant people. The bloody sign of circumcision has been replaced by the bloodless sign of baptism, which is now applied to females as well as males. Lydia, a female, receives baptism, as does her whole household. Later in the chapter we will find that the Philippian jailer, and his whole household as well, will be baptized on the basis of the profession of faith of the covenant head (more on that later, when we get to verse 34).

In our text today we witness biblical evangelism in action in a place where there is no church. But it was obviously undertaken with the intention of planting a church where there had been none before. After the church is planted, baptisms will happen in the context of the church. But since the church of Philippi had not been planted yet, Paul as an evangelist baptizes Lydia and her household. If there is no existing faithful church, then biblical evangelism must be carried out with the intention of planting a church. Why? New sprigs need to be planted in good soil, they need sunshine and water and the attention of the gardener in order to survive and thrive. So new Christians need to be planted in the good soil of a faithful church under the attention of the elders, godly men—fathers in the faith—who can lead the church to maturity.

But in our day baptism has been torn away from the church in many circles. Many Christians would be surprised to learn that “baptism is a sacrament . . . whereby the parties baptized are solemnly admitted into the visible church, and enter into an open and professed engagement to be wholly and only the Lord’s”.⁷ Paul writes that “by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13). Into what body are those who are baptized received? Clearly, into the body of Christ, the Christian church. Only those who are called by God and ordained as ministers of Christ by the Christian church ought to administer baptism. When they baptize, they are not acting as private individuals but as authorized agents of Christ, the King and head of the church.

But there are people today who say they want Christ, but want nothing to do with his church. What about a person who has an emotional attachment to Christianity, claims to have faith in Christ, reads the Bible and prays on his own but never becomes part of a church? Short answer: this is a matter that God alone knows. He infallibly knows every heart. According to our Confession, the church is “the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.”⁸

So, dear friends, we see that biblical evangelism is carried out by men called by God. Biblical evangelism proceeds from the assumption that only God can open a heart. Biblical evangelism is conducted with the intention of planting churches. May God send a revival in our day, moving by his Spirit to bring people to Christ and form them into faithful churches. Amen.

⁷ Westminster Larger Catechism 165

⁸ WCF 25.2