

Are You Open?

“And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshipped God, heard us: whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul”
(Acts 16:14).

Paul was single-minded in his determination to do the will of God. He knew that for the Gospel to spread speedily calls for church planting in strategic commercial centers, and among receptive hearts.

Philippi, like other places where Paul started churches, was a major commercial city located on a favorable trade route. Paul often chose such locations to establish churches. The advantages are obvious.

- People come from the villages and surrounding areas to transact business and work in the cities. Once they receive the gospel they take it home. Thus, it quickly spreads.
- The bulk of finance is usually available in the commercial, trade centers. This is strategic for building strong, indigenous, self-supporting churches.
- Paul typically started his evangelistic efforts in the Jewish synagogue. Ten men were required in order to have a synagogue, and it would be more likely to find ten Jews in a city rather than a smaller town.
- Cities are heavily populated allowing for more people to hear the Gospel.

Receptive hearts are necessary for fruitful evangelism. Paul usually spoke first to the Jews, and his venue, as already mentioned would be the synagogue. Here he would find three types of people.

Jews—not usually receptive but there were occasional conversions.

Proselytes—unlikely to convert since they paid dearly to become Jews.

God-fearers—were usually ready for the Gospel. These people were seeking truth. And they would quickly take the message of salvation to other Gentiles.

Is there anything else that Paul would consider in selecting a location to preach the gospel? Yes, and it is the most important. He would seek God’s direction through prayer and fasting.

Paul and his faithful companions moved as the Spirit directed. Let’s join our progressive church planter on his second missionary journey. Hurry to catch up as he moves from town to town strengthening his baby churches. The result: “So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers” (Acts 16:5, *NIV*).

Traveling along they were “kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to” (Acts 16:6-7).

Why did the Holy Spirit not permit them to preach in these areas? Good question. Ask, but He may not comment.

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD” (Isaiah 55:8).

Perhaps, the timing was not best. Later God did miraculously open the door for all of Asia to hear the message. Have you ever heard that phrase, “strike while the iron is hot”? It could have been that the people, at that particular time in their lives, were not receptive. Paul and the Spirit were on a search for receptive people so that the fires of revival would spread throughout the world.

The real point is this. The Spirit leads and guides us in the direction we need to go.

Open Door

“Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it” (Revelation 3:8).

During the night Paul had a vision. A man from Macedonia was pleading, “Come over and help us!” With that Paul “concluded that God had called us to preach the gospel to them” (Acts 16:10). Wise conclusion, Paul! Here is where the story gets interesting, a little humorous, and somewhat perplexing. Since the Spirit and the vision had directed things were going to be problem-free and revival heavy. Fishers of men, get the nets ready for the big catch. Wrong! Several obstacles lurked ahead. But, God’s people are willing to overcome obstacles to see Him move in lives, and save souls. God’s people don’t wait for everything to be perfect before they move (just ask the children of Israel as they’re leaving Egypt en route to the Red Sea). God’s men and women of faith forge on molding obstacles into opportunities (consult Joshua and Caleb for their rundown on advancing into a giant hostile land flowing with milk and honey.)

“...A great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me” (1 Corinthians 16:9, *NIV*).

Here’s the short list of the challenges they encountered.

As they entered the city of Philippi they notice an inscription on the arches. It emphatically states that no unrecognized religion is allowed in the city. Time to turn back? No, they kept on walking.

They soon learned that there was no synagogue in the city. That meant ten Jewish men could not be found. The lack of a building has stopped many from starting a church...but not Paul.

They heard that a group of worshippers met outside of the city, by the riverside, and they rushed there on the Sabbath. Perhaps, Paul would finally get to meet the man he saw in the vision crying, "Come over into Macedonia and help us." Surprise! They walked right into a women's prayer meeting. The Acts 16 thrills don't stop there. The first European convert was a woman. The first radio program is hosted by a demon possessed girl crying out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved" (Acts 16:17). There was only one remedy (the wrong one) for tired backs and weary bodies. They had them stripped and flogged. Their cozy accommodations included chains for two in a local jail. The entertainment consisted of a midnight duet by the Paul and Silas Singers. The ovation turned into an earthquake. The jailer runs in, fell down at their feet saying, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" A quick Bible study and an early morning baptism conclude the unexpected events. Well, like they say, "first things first." We need to return to the riverside prayer meeting.

"On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there" (Acts 16:13, *NIV*).

God can move anywhere, and can use anyone. He specializes in moving in, through, and because of prayer. Someone has said that when God wants to do something great, He sets His people to praying. Every major revival has been preceded by, and born in the atmosphere of fervent prayer.

The prospect of preaching to a group of women did not discourage Paul. Jews of his day often prayed, "I thank God that I was not born a Gentile or a woman." Rabbis would say, "It is better that the words of the Law be burned than be delivered to a woman!" Paul knew better.

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28, *NIV*).

Open Heart

"The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message" (Acts 16:14, *NIV*).

Lydia was a business woman who sold expensive purple cloth used by royalty. She did not allow her stature in life, or her business efforts to stop her from worshipping God. She was sincere and had a seeking heart.

"And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13).

Open Ears

"One of those listening was a woman named Lydia" (Acts 16:14, *NIV*).

This statement is repeated seven times in two chapters in the Book of Revelation.

“He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches” (Revelation 2:11).

God has a message for the church today if only we open our ears. Find a place where you can attentively listen to God’s Word. Don’t be discouraged by the local surroundings. It is possible to hear from God under the open skies. Lydia did.

Open Mouth

She immediately shared the good news with her household. She didn’t keep in hidden. Her entire household was baptized.

Visualize Lydia responding like the Samaritan lady.

“The woman left...and went back...and told everyone, "Come and meet a man who told me everything I ever did! Can this be the Messiah?" So the people came streaming from the village to see him” (John 4:28-30, *NLT*).

Open Hands

“If you consider me a believer in the Lord, she said, “come and stay at my house.” And she persuaded us” (Acts 16:15, *NIV*).

Lydia immediately looked for ways that she could be of help to the kingdom of God. She was willing to open her home and resources to the work of God.

This is often the response of those converted.

Paul himself asked, “Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus...And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” (Acts 9:5-6).

Open Church

Because the men of God were obedient to the Spirit’s leading, and Lydia’s heart was open to receiving truth, a church at Philippi was born. Perhaps, it started right in Lydia’s home. We do know that it was established, received the Book of Philippians, and was a sacrificial church.

Paul followed a strategy first outlined by Jesus years before.

Jesus said, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Matthew 9:37-38, *NIV*).

In Matthew 10 Jesus continues by telling us how to reach a big harvest.

He has given us power to preach, heal, and deliver. He admonished the early disciples that they should not take anything for their journey. This sounded like music to Timothy and Silas. It is tough carrying luggage hundreds of miles. When they entered a town they were to search for a worthy person—someone that had their heart open to truth, and would offer hospitality. They were to stay in their host's home until they left the town. They would leave behind their blessing and a church. We are all open to that.

Study Questions

1. In which way was Paul single-minded? _____

2. List three (3) advantages of establishing churches in cities.

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

3. What were the three (3) types of people Paul usually spoke to? _____

4. Who were the God-fearers? _____

5. Some assume that doing the will of God guarantees things will be easy and trouble free. What were some of the challenges Paul encountered in fulfilling his vision at Philippi? _____
