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# KEY CITIES IN PAUL'S MISSIONARY PROGRAM

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IN the days of the apostle Paul, Rome had divided her empire into something over thirty provinces in order that she might govern it most effectively. In each of these provinces there was a capital city in which was located the governor's quarters, the central court of the province and the main tax office. Furthermore, these cities were usually strategic commercial centers, and at the same time often contained the chief religious sanctuary of the province. Thus the political, commercial and religious life of a whole province would be centered in its capital city.

This centralization of provincial life in the capital city of each province made such cities the ideal locations for planting the early churches throughout the empire. For a church planted in one of these cities would evangelize not only its local population, but also radiate its influence throughout the whole province, since every branch of political, economic and religious life in the whole province was centered in its capital city, and thus would sooner or later come in contact with any Christian church there.

The importance of these Roman provincial capitals in the spread of the gospel is well illustrated in the case of Antioch, the capital of the province of Syria. It was the second greatest city\* in the world and the key city of the eastern part of the empire. Here the emperor resided whenever he visited the East and here was the headquarters of the governor of Syria—the most important political office in any province of the empire, for his military power extended not only over his own province, but also over all the provinces of Asia Minor. Furthermore, as the capital of Syria, it was the meeting place of the "concilium" of the municipalities of the province, and

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\*Alexandria had a larger population and a greater volume of commerce, but the military influence and political power of Antioch far exceeded that of the Egyptian city.

hither all the important cities of Syria were continually sending their most influential delegates.

It was also one of the great importing centres of the empire and thus extended its influence eastward beyond the bounds of the empire into Arabia, Babylonia, Persia and India. Its commercial life was centered on the importation of luxuries from the Orient and this accounts for many peculiar features of the city's life. Money came easy and went easy. The man from the far East who had finally gotten his goods safely to Antioch was sure of a handsome reward for his labor; and the Roman who bought the merchandise from him was certain of still greater returns as quickly as he could trans-ship the goods to Rome and the other western markets. Thus it is not surprising to find one of the most active mints of the empire here, and to learn that the wealth of the city was prodigious. "No city in all the empire exceeded it in splendor and magnificence of its public structures."\*

Easy money usually leads to an exaltation of pleasure, and this was another characteristic of the city. Mommsen says, "In no city of antiquity was the enjoyment of life so much the main thing and its duties so incidental as in Antioch." The fact that it was the only city in the empire with street lights is one illustration showing to what extent this pleasure loving spirit was carried on.

Much of this high life was centered in Daphne, a suburb of the city. It had originally been founded as an oracular shrine;\*\* but Baal worship had corrupted it until in Paul's day Daphne was a synonym for the grossest licentiousness. But in spite of its immoral character, Daphne remained a great religious sanctuary where Greek, Syrian and Roman gods were alike revered.

All these characteristics of Syrian Antioch made it an ideal center for reaching the Gentile world. Here in the midst of the gods of Syria, Greece, and Rome, the church was forced to prove that Jesus Christ is the only living and true God. Here in the midst of a people whose chief

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\*Mommsen.

\*\*Its oracular power always clung to it to a greater or less degree and even as late as Hadrian we find this emperor coming here to consult the oracles.

ambitions were honor, wealth, and pleasure, the church was forced to prove that the salvation of one human soul is greater than winning the whole world. Here was located in some form every enemy against which the church must fight throughout the future. If she could win in Antioch she could ultimately win in all the Roman Empire.

Granting that the church could win a spiritual victory in Antioch, it was only a question of time until the gospel would be carried to all the world; for merchants from the East would carry the gospel which they had learned at Antioch to Arabia, Babylonia, Persia, and India; and merchants, soldiers and government officials would carry that same gospel westward throughout the whole Roman Empire. As far as the question of communication was concerned, Syrian Antioch was in reality the hub of the universe. It is thus very plain to see why God chose the strategically located city of Syrian Antioch as the first great foreign mission base.

Another Roman provincial capital which served as a key city in Paul's missionary program was Corinth in Achaia. Although it was an old and famous Greek city, it had been destroyed by the Romans in 146 B. C., and its site was in ruins until the time of Julius Caesar. His military and political genius saw the strategic situation of the isthmus of Corinth and he ordered the city thereon to be refounded. Shortly afterwards he was assassinated, but his orders were carried out and Corinth was rebuilt and called in his honor *Colonia Laus Iulia Corinthus*. It was settled largely by freedmen, and manumitted slaves were even eligible for office. Upon the high rock of the isthmus a citadel was established, and the lower ground turned over to commerce.

The city grew by leaps and bounds, for its geographic position made it the chief gateway between the eastern and western parts of the Roman Empire. Its harbors were alive with ships and travelers. And we must remember that the world of Paul's day was full of travelers—some traveling for an education, some for business, some for health. Athletes were going to the great games, pilgrims to the various shrines, musicians and actors to the

festivals, the rich to fancy watering places, and the poor in search of employment. Here in Corinth Paul sat and preached Christ for a year and a half, and all classes of men from every nation under heaven heard the good news of salvation.

Then, too, Corinth was considered as an outcast city because of the low caste of so many of her citizens and visitors. Like Daphne, Corinth was a synonym of evil, but Corinth was much lower down the scale. Here was Paul's opportunity to prove to the world that Jesus Christ is able to save to the uttermost, not only the individual but also the community. The Christianizing of Corinth was, in one respect, like the conversion of Paul himself; it can be explained only by Divine Grace. And the Christian church he founded at Corinth became a gigantic lighthouse in the midst of the Mediterranean and cast its spiritual rays from Caesaria on the East to the Pillars of Hercules on the West.

As a key city, Ephesus in Asia was very similar to Corinth. Its political and its commercial importance were great; for it was the gateway to Asia Minor, and in addition its temple of Diana was one of the greatest shrines of the empire. What has been said of the element of travel in Corinth can be repeated in the case of Ephesus except that the amount of commerce here was somewhat less. But the combination of Paul's year and a half at Corinth and his two years at Ephesus enabled him to meet so many peoples from so many places that these two stopovers were almost as beneficial to the evangelization of the world as a trip through the empire would have been.

Of the four greatest cities in the eastern part of the Roman Empire Paul labored for a goodly time in all except Alexandria in Egypt. The efficacy of Paul's method of working in these chief cities of the various provinces is well illustrated in the book of the Revelation where we find that in the short time between Paul's labors and John's exile, the Ephesian church had expanded to catch all the lesser strategic cities of the province.

In addition to dividing the empire into various provinces Rome had also subdivided each province into various

smaller units for administrative purposes, much as we divide a state into congressional districts, counties, etc. Whenever any one of these lesser administrative units was important enough, Paul would labor there also in its chief city. These cities were, in fact, of similar kind to a provincial capital, but smaller in scope of power and influence.

Pisidian Antioch is an example of such a smaller administrative capital. Augustus had planted there a colony (*Colonia Antiochia Caesaria*) from the famous fifth Gallic legion "Alaudae" of Julius Caesar probably about 25 B. C.—at any rate, not later than 6 B. C. It was the military center of six such colonies which were established in order to preserve peace in the mountainous portion of central Asia Minor and it thus became the administrative center of that region in the southern part of the province of Galatia.

In addition to this strong Roman element in the city there was also a large local native population; for the land in and about the colony had formerly been the temple property of the god Mem Askaenos, whose important shrine was near the city. There was also a third element, namely the Jewish population, who were the descendants of the old Seleucid foundations in Phrygia.

Thus by working in this city Paul had an opportunity to evangelize the southern portion of Galatia with its three types of population, because Pisidian Antioch was the administrative center for that "regio." Although he was persecuted on his first visit here, he was later permitted to return and accomplish his task of establishing a church.

Cities of similar political and economic importance in Greece were Philippi and Thessalonica. The latter was more important than Philippi, for it was the administrative center for one of the four districts of Macedonia and was also the home of the governor. In a commercial way both were very strategically located along the Egnation road, which was the only passageway across the Grecian peninsula other than Corinth. Paul's desire to labor personally in these cities was frustrated by riots, but nevertheless he was able to plant an important church in each before he was driven out.

If circumstance compelled Paul to labor in cities of still smaller size and influence, he was always ready to do so until a new and better field of labor was opened. For example, when driven out of Pisidian Antioch, he journeyed to a smaller administrative and commercial center, namely Iconium; when persecuted here he journeyed on still farther to the smaller city of Lystra, the most distant of the six colonies of which Pisidian Antioch was the center; and when compelled to leave here he still journeyed on until he came to Derbe, the frontier city of the province and custom station on the Via Sebaste.

When Paul's missionary journeys are thus traced with a view to discovering why he chose these particular cities to labor in, one is led to conclude: (1) Paul endeavored to found churches in the various provincial capitals, because these cities were the ideal distributing centers for these provinces. (2) If a province was very large (as Galatia) or contained several strategically located cities (as Macedonia) Paul would evangelize, in addition, these less important cities. (3) If emergencies drove him from these key cities, he would temporarily labor in smaller fields as at Lystra and Berea.

Thus it is easy to understand why Paul was always longing to preach in Rome, the capital and key city of the whole Roman Empire, and why he rejoiced when he was permitted to labor there, although a prisoner. The results of his two years' evangelistic work there are too great to be estimated. The work of Onesimus in the church at Colossae is just one instance of how far the influence of Paul's labors in Rome extended.

The final definite step in Paul's plan of evangelizing the world in his own generation is seen in his desire to preach in Spain, the chief distributing center of the western part of the empire. Thus Paul's labors and plans reached around the Mediterranean sea from Palestine through Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, Italy, and Spain; and if longer life had been allotted to him, who can doubt that he would have completed the circuit of the Mediterranean via Africa, and would thus have organized the whole Roman Empire?