

May 10, 2009 by Steve Brandon



Acts and the Nepali Church (part 2)

Acts 9-20

8. Miraculous Conversions

9. Healing the Sick

10. New Regions

11. Political Opposition

12. Difficult Living

13. False Teaching

14. Single Church Cities

I returned last week from a trip to Nepal. I shared last Sunday morning of some of my observations from my trip by walking through the book of Acts and looking at the early church. In my message I was seeking to show you how the church in Nepal is experiencing many of the same things that the early church experienced as well. Last week, we looked at the first eight chapters of the book of Acts. As I thought about our time in the word this morning, I thought that it would be most appropriate for me to finish what I began last week.

I shared this with you because this is one of the main things that I have taken away from my trip. What a privilege we have of partnering with church in Nepal who are so close to the early church.

Now, the church is the church, so, it's not that we, in America, can't relate to the book of Acts and what we read about the early church. We can. But, our experience, here in America, is a fair bit different than the experience of those in Nepal. In Nepal, they are experiencing first hand many of the things that the early church experienced. The way that I phrased it last week was like this. We are distant relatives to the early church, but the church in Nepal is a close cousin to the early church. And we have much to learn from them.

Last week, as we traveled through the book of Acts, I gave you seven characteristics of the early church (as recorded in Acts), which are also true of the church in Nepal. Some of these characteristics are entirely foreign to us, like astronomical, conversion growth, and physical persecution. Others of these are characteristics that we are like them, but can learn better, like the place of baptism, prayer and boldness. Others we are genuine sharers with them, especially in the area of meeting the needs of the society, like caring for orphans and widows.

This morning, I want to pick up our travels through the book of Acts, by beginning in chapter 9 in much the same fashion as we did last week. I want to tell the story of the early church as Luke tells it and then, draw some parallels with the church in Nepal with what I experienced and observed. To help you catch up to speed, I want to review my first 7 observations.

First of all, the church in Nepal has experienced, ...

1. Astronomical Growth

We saw this from Acts, chapter 2, when the church, on the day of Pentecost, went from less than 2 dozen to 3,000 overnight (according to Acts 2:41). Later, we saw the church jump to more than 5,000 (according to Acts 4:4). It's a similar growth that the church in Nepal has experienced. And it's all conversion growth!

The second observation that I made was of ...

2. The Place of Baptism

In the early church, it was significant for people to be baptized. So also for the typical Nepali. The date of their baptism is as significant to them as is the date that they heard and believed in the gospel. It's because of the place of baptism in the society. To "take baptism" is to renounce your former life and place your hope completely in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The third observation that I made from the book of Acts is ...

3. The Presence of Persecution

We saw this come up in chapter 4, with Peter and John being placed in prison. Persecution is a daily reality in Nepal. Christians are in the great minority in the culture of Nepal, just like the early church. As such, many Christians have been ostracized from their families and villages and face great difficulties in their life.

A fourth characteristic that we look at last week is ...

4. Passionate Prayer

We saw this in Acts, chapter 4, verse 31, when the people prayed, and the ground was shaken. This is a point where we can learn from the Nepali church. They pray passionately. When you are facing such persecution, it's no wonder that they pray so fervently for God's help. Now, it must be mentioned that passionate praying isn't any more godly than reverent praying. You can have passionate sounding prayers that are

all fake and not pleasing to God in any way. Likewise, reverent prayers may be equally abhorrent to the Lord, if done without faith.

The fifth characteristic from Acts (and the Nepali church) is ...

5. Boldness

We read in Acts 4:31 that after they prayed and experienced the shaking of the place, "they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness" (Acts 4:31). This one word explains much behind the expansion of the early church, as well as the expansion of the church in Nepal. Those who have come to embrace Christ, simply aren't timid about their faith. They had experienced the change of God upon their lives and were boldly proclaiming the One who had changed them.

And as we reach the end of chapter 4, we see that the fruit of their conversion wasn't merely words only. Sixthly, they were ...

6. Meeting Needs

Out of love for one another, they were sharing their property with one another, selling what they owned to help other Christians who were in distress. As Christianity puts on some practical shoe-leather, non-Christians are witnesses to the love, which attests to its reality. I do not think it to be any accident that such sharing brought a good reputation among the pagan people of the early church. In Acts 5:13, we read, "the people held them in high esteem."

But, their bold preaching continued to bring persecution. This was my seventh observation. The early church was ...

7. Physically Beaten

In Acts 5, we read of the apostles who were beaten and released. They went on their way, "rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name" (Acts 5:41). They turned around and "kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ" (Acts 5:42). Chapters 6 and 7 tell the story of the stoning of Stephen. Physical persecution is a reality in Nepal, as I shared with you last week. And in this way, the church in Nepal is like the early church in a way that we, in America, are not.

Acts 8 records the spread of the gospel that took place as a result of the persecution, as Philip brought the gospel to Samaria and to the Ethiopian Eunuch. And in this way, the church in Nepal is like the early church.

Let's continue on in the book of Acts. This morning I have seven more characteristics of the early church that is shared in a particular way with the church in Nepal. Here is my eight observation.

8. Miraculous Conversions

Acts 9 records one of the most miraculous conversions of all time, that of the apostle Paul. He was on his way, papers in hand, to arrest the believers in Damascus. But, Jesus appeared to him saying, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" (Acts 9:4). Instantly, he was blinded (Acts 9:8). The only way that he reached Damascus was with the aid of some other people, who led him there (Acts 9:8). Ananias came to him, gave him a word from the Lord about his new ministry on behalf of the church (Acts 9:15-16), and opened his eyes so that he could see (Acts 9:18). "Immediately," Paul arose, was baptized, and began to proclaim Christ.

Now, that was a miraculous conversion. Paul testified concerning himself that he was "a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a violent aggressor" (1 Tim. 1:13). Yet, in God's grace, Paul found mercy. He became, perhaps, the most crucial person to shape the mission of the early church. He labored tirelessly for the gospel of Christ. He wrote 13 letters, which have come to form a quarter of our New Testament. These letters express the heart and soul of Christian theology.

And miraculous conversions are taking place in Nepal. Now, in one measure, all conversions are miraculous. People simply don't turn from their sins and believe in Jesus Christ apart from the miraculous working of God in their lives. Furthermore, here in the United States, we have witnessed some miraculous conversions. Personally, I have known drug abusers who have turned to Christ. I have known violent men who have turned to Christ. I have known sexually immoral men who have turned to Christ. The only explanation that can be given in these cases is that our God is working miracles in converting these people. I want to tell you a few stories of what I encountered in Nepal.

I heard one man give his testimony. Before his conversion, he was a violent man. He physically assaulted a man and was wanted by the police. So, he left the country, going into India. After the statute of limitations were over and the police could no longer arrest him, he returned to Nepal. He happened upon some Christians and was invited to attend church. (In those days, the persecution was strong, so they had to meet at night). He said that the service started at 8pm. The singing lasted until 10pm, after which there was a time of preaching. When the service finished, he engaged in conversation with the preacher until 4am, whereupon he put his faith in Christ. He was baptized 30 minutes later (still under the cover of darkness, lest he be seen and the church be exposed).

That was 33 years ago. He has remained faithful to the Lord ever since. Today he is a pastor of a church. The preacher who was the means of his conversion has called him "the one-night believer," much like the apostle Paul. To this day, like Paul, he acknowledges that he is a wicked man to whom God has continued to show His grace.

I also had the privilege of meeting a former Maoist, who has now embraced Christ and is a prominent young leader in a small fellowship. Unfortunately, I didn't have time to hear his full testimony, but the Maoists are known far and wide in Nepal for their arrogance and willingness to use violence, if necessary, to get their way.

In Nepal, I heard the testimony of a former gang member who was living in India, and was involved in some dangerous activity. His close friend was killed. And through the grape vine, he heard that he was the next target. So, he fled the next day for his life into Nepal, where he soon gave his life to Christ. Today, he is leading a church in his village.

I heard stories from the pastors I was training of how some were former drunkards and drug users, but were changed by the grace of God in their lives. God is miraculously converting people in Nepal, a bit like He converted Saul. Now, again, it's not so different than here in America, but it is definitely encouraging.

As we continue through Acts, we see the blessing of God upon the churches. A summary statement of God's blessing comes in verse 31, "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase" (Acts 9:31). The last half of chapter 9 includes the healing of several people. We see the church actively being involved in being the means of God's healing hand. A man named Aeneas had been paralyzed and bedridden for 8 years. Through Peter, this man was healed instantly. A woman named Tabitha had died. But, through the hands of Peter, she arose and lived again. This leads to my 9th observation.

The early church was involved in ...

9. Healing the Sick

This is especially true in Nepal. At the end of every church service in Nepal, the sick come up front, seeking prayer for healing. (I believe that this practice isn't merely a Nepali practice. It is an Asian practice. But, it is different than our experience. And the difference shows how Nepal is closer to the early church than we are).

Anyway, at the end of every church, the sick gather in front around the church leaders, who pray for them, Nepali style (all at the same time). They are praying for their healing, not only because they need healing, but because they believe that God heals and they have experienced the healing hand of God in their lives.

On several occasions, I was asked to pray for the sick after I preached. On one occasion, I prayed for a woman who was sprawled out on the floor, completely unresponsive to anything. She had walked to church. But, at some point during the service, she had lapsed into a seizure and was prone on the floor. Apparently, she suffers from frequent fainting fits like this. I would not be surprised if she was demon possessed. Anyway, I prayed for her with the other leaders of the church.

On another occasion, after I had spoken to a home fellowship group, I was summoned to the home of one of those who were in attendance. His wife was an 80 year old woman who was suffering from a fever. She had been sick for four days before I arrived.

The church in Nepal pray for the sick for several reasons. First of all, they are so poor that they have nowhere else to turn. Often, the price of hospital care is simply way beyond their reach. Second, they have seen God miraculously heal others, and they are hoping for the same in their lives.

In fact, this is the testimony of the two oldest men in the church where I preached and spent half of my time during my trip to Nepal. In both instances, their wives were sick. The Hindu rituals and payments made to the witch doctors didn't help at all. But, when a Christian pastor came and prayed over their wives, they were cured. These men took note of the link between the prayer and the healing and believed in Christ. Both of these men are now trusted deacons in the church.

Such healing is what took place in the last half of Acts 9. Through the Lord, Peter (and prayer) became the avenue to cure a paralyzed man and to raise a woman from the dead.

As I have mixed with the Nepali people, I have been confronted by my own lack of faith. Have we become too secular? Have we come to believe that medicine is the solution to all medical problems? The early church sought the Lord to heal, and so has the church in Nepal. I think that we have much to learn from the church in Nepal.

As we come to chapter 10 in Acts, we see the gospel coming to Caesarea, and more particularly, to the Gentiles. This was the first time that the gospel had gone beyond the Jews. Through a dream, the Lord summoned Peter to go to Caesarea. He came and preached to Cornelius and a few "relatives and close friends" that he had invited to his house. When Peter preached, they believed. And with that, the gospel went to the Gentiles.

So radical was this, that the church leaders took issue with Peter (11:2). They called him in and sought an explanation from him of what took place (11:3). "Peter, why would you go to the Gentiles?" "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them???" (Acts 11:3).

In God's providence, Peter's explanation won the day. He explained how it was God who summoned him in a miraculous way to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. It was God's desire that Gentiles be brought into the church as well. The brethren that heard his explanation "glorified God, saying, 'Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life'" (Acts 11:18). Thus, the way was paved for the evangelization of the world. And since that day, the gospel has gone forth to many Gentile nations, like the United States and Nepal.

Now, here we come to observation #10. We see the early church taking the gospel to ...

10. New Regions

This is one of the things that most excites me about the church in Nepal. The gospel is being brought to new regions all the time! There are new churches arising in new regions all the time. In the location that I spent a week, the church there is less than ten years old. I'm not talking about the particular church that I visited last week. I'm talking about any church at all in that entire region. It's only been in the last few years that there has been any gospel witness in this area. Ten years ago, there were no Christians in this village, with no Christian witness. And now, there are more than a hundred! And what has taken place in this location isn't unique at all throughout Nepal. There are many places in Nepal where you have a new church, which happens to be the only church in the village.

While in Nepal, I spent one Saturday worshipping with a church that was less than ten years old. The next Saturday, I was in another village with another church that was less than five years old. Five years ago, there were no Christians in that village! During the week, I made a trek with some of the guys from the church several hours up the mountain to preach in a church that is being planted by the mother church where I was staying. They have rented an upper room which they have converted into a Christian meeting room. They usually hold their weekly services in that place. But, sometimes, the entire church comes down to visit the mother church. It is the only church in this village. And there are many such villages that are scattered all throughout Nepal.

There is simply no parallel to our circumstances in the United States. You have places in the Nepal where the people have no category in their minds at all for "church." They have never seen one, nor witnessed one. In America, we often hear the term, "Unchurched." But, the "unchurched" in America at least have a category for "church" in their mind, however poor may be their concept. Many of the "unchurched" in America have seen churches and have attended weddings and funerals in churches in America. If they have never stepped foot in a church, at least they have seen many churches from the road. But, not so in Nepal.

For those in Nepal, the church gathering in a location is totally new to them, and many of them are curious. One Saturday, when I was preaching in a church, there was a woman standing outside the building, looking inside to see what was going on. I could tell that she was interested in what was going on, but wasn't at all engaged with anything taking place. Afterwards, I found out the story. She and her husband own the building that the church rents. Her husband prevents her from being around the building when the church meets. However, when her husband is away, as was the case on this particular day, she comes to see what's going on. The church has invited her to come into the room and join them. But, she has refused, preferring to stand by the window and merely watch to see what's going on.

Taking the gospel to new regions took place in the early church and is taking place today in Nepal. It all started with the gospel coming to Caesarea (in chapter 10). It continued through the end of chapter 11 as the church spread also to Antioch. As we come to Acts 12, we see yet another characteristic of the early church, which is also found in Nepal. I'm calling it ...

11. Political Opposition

In Acts 12, we see Herod, the king, laying hands on some of the church's leaders, "to mistreat them" (Acts 12:1). According to verse 2, "He had James, the brother of John, put to death with a sword" (12:2) and was planning to do the same with Peter as well. The rest of Acts 12 is devoted to telling the story of how God protected Peter from Herod. On the very night when Peter was about to be killed, the Lord send an angel to the jail to rescue him from prison. Soon afterwards, Herod was distracted by the political pressures taking place in Tyre and Sidon, so that Peter's life was saved. It was all the protecting hand of God amidst the opposition to the church and the gospel.

Now, political opposition to the church in Nepal is decreasing, but it is still a reality. In Nepal, their situation today may not be so much "political opposition" as it is "political unrest." But, political unrest often leads to political opposition.

I faced the political unrest while in Nepal. My first Sunday in Nepal, we were seeking to go to attend a church worship service. As we were preparing to go, we received a call from those in the church telling us that there was trouble brewing. Apparently, there was a wedding in which some men got drunk and began to speak some cruel things to a woman, who went home and told her brothers. They returned to the scene with swords, seeking revenge. However, those causing the trouble had already left. Those seeking revenge killed an innocent person, and put another in critical condition as well as injuring a handful more. As the story goes, the police did nothing to stop the fighting, but did catch the suspected murderer and put him in prison.

On Friday, a large mob of several hundred people had gathered around the police station, requesting the release of the prisoner, so that they might take justice into their own hands. So, the people were in opposition to the police. When this happens in Nepal, they often call a *bhunde*, which means that they place rocks or trees in the road, thereby preventing motorized vehicles from passing. They also put pressure on the people, preventing them from working during a *bhunde*. The idea is that if you inconvenience enough people, the political pressure will be enough to force the authorities to grant whatever it is that you want to have happen.

On this Saturday morning, we faced a blockade of cars and trucks who refused to move for us. So, we had to park our car and walk several miles to church. God was faithful to protect us. The church service went on as planned. Over the next several days that I spent in this village, there was much political unrest. On several occasions, we saw a large mob form in front of the police station, demanding the release of the prisoner. On one occasion, as we were leaving town, we were walking up the road and encountered a man walking down the street with a 3 foot long sword, defying the police. The worse we faced in this village was the scorn of some twenty people warning us not to return to the village again. When we returned the next day, we were confronted again by these people who said that they ordered us not to return. I'm thankful for the response of a native Nepali, who knew this man. He said, "That was for yesterday!" God protected us, just like he protected Peter in Acts 12.

We face nothing of those difficulties here in America. The government is on our side, protecting our physical safety. The government in Nepal is weak and powerless to the whims of the people, which makes it an especially dangerous place to be, especially now, as there is great political turmoil in Nepal. The prime minister has just resigned. And they may be headed for civil war.

Danger and persecution is very present in Nepal. For instance, the day after I left Nepal, I received an email from one who had visited where I had stayed. He wrote, ...

When we arrived at around 2:30PM, several church members were walking towards the children's home. They shared that there had been some trouble. It seems that earlier in the week, the contractor in the church had gone to the church building to check on how much sand and cement he had left and found 400-500 people meeting inside the church. They were arguing with each other about a proposed airport that the government was planning on building in the area. Some of the men were smoking and they were using foul language. The contractor returned to get the pastor of the church. When the

pastor arrived he told them that they would have to leave. They eventually left but were evidently angered that they could not just go into the church for a meeting without asking.

At 8:30 this morning, as the pastor was getting a newspaper, some people started yelling at him. A crowd of around 100 gathered and demanded that he immediately remove several bags of cement and other items from a nearby shop where they were being stored for the church construction. A young believer was nearby and asked them if it would be ok to move the things after the church. The crowd turned on him and started to beat him. They then dragged the pastor and him up the hill to the church.

Another man in the church learned of the commotion and went to reason with the group at the church. He told them that if they would have asked to use the church, they would probably been allowed to use it for their community meeting provided they did not smoke and not use foul language. The contractor came a little later and said that if they want to beat someone, he is ready. The crowd calmed down some, but many were still angry. Some of the men cut down a few small trees and placed them across the road leading to the church. They told the men that if anyone crossed the barrier and went to church this morning, they would be sorry. (Church begins at 11:00AM). They also forced some of the believers to empty the shop of the cement and other things prior to church.

As people started coming to church, they saw the barrier and heard the threats. However, this did not deter nearly 200 believers from climbing over the trees to go to the church service. Please pray for the church which sits as a light on a hill in a very dark place. Pray for protection for God's people and pray that each of the believers will stand firm in their faith and that they would exchange love for hatred.

...

PS: The young man who was beaten by the crowd seems to be ok. His nose is very sore where he was hit and his back hurts where he had been hit and kicked. He has been a Christian for several years and is strong in his faith. He works as a laborer and volunteered many hours helping to build the church building.

As I hear of the things taking place in Nepal, I think to myself, "where else in the world to we want to help the church, than where they are facing such difficulties?" We are helping Nepal, precisely because of such difficulties. And I have told this to those in Nepal, that they might not think that such difficulties will turn our hearts away from these people.

Well, let's continue on in our walk through Acts. At the beginning of Acts 13, we see the leaders of the church in Antioch "ministering to the Lord and fasting" (Acts 13:2), seeking the Lord's will with the church. The Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2). And so, the church sent them out to spread the gospel in new lands. Acts 13 and 14 tell the story of how they set sail from Antioch and visited the cities of Psidion Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. These were places that had never before heard the gospel, much like Nepal. This is happening in Nepal, as the gospel continues to go to new regions (but, we already looked at that).

At this point, I merely want to point out Paul's message to the new believers in these regions. In Acts 14:22, he said, "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." Here's my observation. The early church and the church in Nepal face ...

12. Difficult Living

It is true that all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted (2 Tim. 3:12). (And if you know nothing of being ridiculed for your faith, then you should examine your life, perhaps the Lord wants to increase your boldness in telling others of what you believe.) However, all are not persecuted to the same degree. The tribulations of some are greater than the tribulations of another. Those in the early church as well as those in Nepal have been called to particularly difficult lives.

Nepali Christian live in a culture in which they are the minority. Everything in the culture is against them. There are idols everywhere. The darkness is everywhere. The wickedness is everywhere. Sickness is everywhere. Hardship is everywhere. Their lives are swimming upstream.

Those in Nepal know this. One of the men with whom I mixed with during my last week in Nepal spoke about the way that they deal with those who express an interest in the faith. Right up front, they confront them about the difficulties that they will face for following Christ. This man said that they don't want to create converts who aren't ready to pay the price.

For us and the church in Nepal, we can do what Paul did. He came to them. After preaching in these cities and seeing some come to Christ, he then returned to them. That's the point of Acts 14:21, ... "they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith." And, even later, Paul's heart was to come along side of them and help them. In Acts 15:36, Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are." As he went, he sought to strengthen the church in those location (16:5).

We can do the same with the church in Nepal. We can visit them. We can encourage them. We can strengthen them. We can pray for them. These sorts of things would be particularly helpful to them, because their lives are particularly difficult.

Well, let's continue on in our journey through Acts. As we come to Acts 15, we see the account of the famous Jerusalem Counsel. At the counsel, they were seeking to clarify the gospel. Particularly the question was this: "Do you need to be circumcised to be saved?" There were

some from Judea (15:1) and from the sect of the Pharisees (15:5) who believed that you indeed needed to be circumcised in order to be saved. Others, namely, Paul and Barnabas and the other apostles disagreed. And so, after some back and forth debate, the established the truth that is recorded for us in Acts 15:11, "We believe that we [Jews] are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they [the Gentiles] also are."

This was the first major battle of the early church. Likewise, the church in Nepal is susceptible to some of these same battles as well. I'm calling this observation, ...

13. False Teaching

As Nepal opens up more and more, there will be more and more false teaching that enters into the country and begins to attack the church. Now, I'm not aware of any great movement of false teaching that's taking place in Nepal. But, I am aware of some.

I remember speaking with a layman who preaching in one of the fellowship groups surrounding Bhakunde. I asked him what he preached the last time that he had an opportunity to preach. He said that He preached on Matthew 24, which speaks about false Christs coming to deceive. The discussion then came around to talking about some movement that originated in Korea and has come to the churches in Nepal. Apparently, there is a guy in Korea, who claims that he is the Christ. And his disciples are spreading his theology in Nepal. This is why this man was preaching on Matthew 24, because Jesus, Himself, said, ...

Matthew 24:23-27

If anyone says to you, "Behold, here is the Christ," or "There He is," do not believe him. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect. Behold, I have told you in advance. So if they say to you, "Behold, He is in the wilderness," do not go out, or, "Behold, He is in the inner rooms," do not believe them. For just as the lightning comes from the east and flashes even to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be.

Even the reading of this text itself ought to dispel the heresy that's beginning to invade some churches in Nepal. However, with so little doctrinal discernment in Nepal, there have been some who are so convinced that this guy is the Christ that they are even praying in his name, rather than in the name of Jesus.

One of the reasons why Nepal is particularly susceptible to false teaching is because of their lack of literacy. Many women in Nepal cannot read or write. There are a fair number of men as well, especially in the more rural areas, who cannot read or write. As such, they stand a bit like those in the early church, who had no New Testaments, because it wasn't yet written. They are easily susceptible to false teaching.

By in large, however, as I mixed with the leaders of the church in Nepal, I was very encouraged by the way in which they were interacting with the Scriptures and shepherding the church through these dangers. The shepherds of the church are doing a commendable job in teaching the people what is true and what is false. And yet, as a young church, they are in danger of false teaching.

One of the ways that I sought to help the leaders in Nepal to combat the errors that come there way was to encourage the men to keep the gospel front and center in all that they do. Preach about it. Sing about it. Pray about it. Doing so will protect them from error.

I have one final observations from the book of Acts in which Nepal is closer to the early church than we are. I'm calling it ...

14. Single Church Cities

As you work through Acts 16 and following, you see Paul traveling and preaching the gospel. In chapter 16, he comes to Philippi. In chapter 17, he comes to Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens. In chapter 18, he is in Corinth. In chapter 19, he is in Ephesus. In all of the places that he went, he sought to gather believers and begin a church.

We know from other letters in the New Testament of how in some of these cities, churches grew up. We know of the church in Philippi. We know of the church in Thessalonica. We know of the church in Corinth. We know of the church in Ephesus. What's interesting is that we don't know of two churches in any of these cities. Rather, there is only one church in each city. It's not that first church of Philippi is down the road from the second church in Philippi. Nor are there two churches in Thessalonica or Corinth or Ephesus.

It's not that two churches in a single city are wrong in any way. Here in America, having one church in each city would be well nigh impossible with the sheer number of Christians that go to church. But, in the early church, it's merely that in the early days, all of the believers in a certain city gathered together in one location. There weren't enough believers to consider having another church across the city. Now, as history unfolds, surely wouldn't be surprised if that indeed took place as more and more people became Christians in each of these locations. But, in the time of the New Testament, there was only one church in each city.

In Nepal, this is common place. In many, many villages across the land, if you are a Christian, you have one church available for you to attend. There aren't two churches in any one of these "cities." There is only one. There is something incredibly refreshing about such things. It makes church hopping impossible. You can't merely decide to go to the next church down the street, because you like their children's program better. You can't get to the next church.

In our culture, we hardly know of any place like this. Even if you live in a rural location, there are usually several church options surrounding you in a nearby city. It's good for us to taste of ministry that is close to the early church in this way.

I have one final comment to make. It's really not so much an observation about the church as it is a statement for us to ponder.

In Acts 20, we read of how Paul came to Miletus and summoned the Ephesian elders to come and meet him there. He didn't want to enter into Ephesus, because he had to leave town quickly, and any visit to the city would certainly delay his trip (Acts 20:16). He gives them a long speech. He ends (in verse 35) with some words of Jesus, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Certainly, the church in Nepal has much to teach us. We have (and will) learn many things from them. However, in many ways, we stand as the giver in this relationship. It's impossible for them to come here to the United States. It's impossible for them to give to us physically in any way that would be of any help to us. However, we can help them. We can give to them. I trust that we will realize the blessing of God as we give ourselves to others.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on May 10, 2009 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.
