

Acts

Acts 16:16-38 - Genuinely Christian, or fake?

Is there a clue as to why “The Lord opened Lydia’s heart to respond to Paul’s message” back in **verse 14**? It was an act done deliberately by the Holy Spirit, but why out of all the people in Philippi, including the small group of Jewish ladies meeting on the Jewish Sabbath down by the river, did the Spirit choose to open just her heart to understand the gospel message?

Is there a clue? Yes, in the next verse, **verse 15**, when Lydia invites Paul and his companions, Silas, Timothy and Luke to stay at her home “IF,” she says, **“you judge me to be a genuine believer in the Lord.”**

But why would Lydia say that? Well, take into account she was a “dealer” by trade (verse 14), and she was very good at dealing too, because she’d built a thriving business in two Greek cities, Philippi and Thyatira. Which is amazing because here was a **Jewish woman** in foreign, thoroughly pagan and probably male dominant cities somehow able to run a luxury business in much desired purple cloth attracting high class customers with strict demands to her doors.

For her to succeed in the rough and risky business of “wheelin’ and dealin’” her reputation for being utterly honest and genuine was crucial. And with the kind of discerning clientele she had she’d better be buying and selling at a fair price, no cheating, no clever sales tactics, no cutting the cloth a few inches short to make a larger profit, and no after market inferior cloth replacing the real thing. Any hint of deception and she’d be out of business immediately.

It was a lady of this calibre and reputation, then, that the Holy Spirit had chosen. Why? Because there’s a lesson coming up that would enable the church in any age to tell a genuine Christian from a fake.

And Lydia was no fake, as we see in her actually wanting Paul and his companions to check her out to see if she was genuine in her belief in Jesus. And clearly, yes she was, because Luke writes in **verse 15**, “she persuaded (or convinced) us.” So here was a lady who could be correctly and accurately described as being “genuinely Christian.”

With that in mind we are now introduced by the Holy Spirit to “a slave girl” in **verse 16**, in stark contrast to Lydia. A fake, in other words.

Acts 16, then, becomes a **tale of two ladies**, orchestrated by the Holy Spirit to help us with a problem we've had in Christianity ever since Ananias and Sapphira gave the appearance of being genuine in their generosity back in Acts 5. And if it wasn't for the Holy Spirit spilling the beans they might have got away with it too. Which raises the question, "How do you tell between who's genuine and who isn't?" And especially when our church history has been littered with harlequins, all dressed up to look like Christians, and very good ones too, to the point that some of them even became much admired leaders, but were later revealed as fakes and pretenders.

The Holy Spirit, always ahead of the game, knew this would be a problem for us, so made provision for us in Acts 16 by supplying us with the forensic equipment we'd need for detecting a really good fake from the real thing. And there are several clues that show us **it's the focus** of the genuine versus the fake that give the game away. For Lydia, verse 15, the focus was "the Lord," but everything connected to the slave girl was focused on the physical.

We see that right away in the description of the slave girl in **verse 16**, that "She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune telling." And she could tell a person's fortune all right because she "had a spirit that could foretell the future," and that really wows people. Anyone in any profession confidently predicting the future, whether it be the economy, the climate, the stock market, the price of homes or a daily horoscope, has an eager audience.

But it's all physical. A person wants to know the future for his or her physical comfort, that things are going to be all right physically, whether it's money-wise or health or a romance coming up. And we see that repeated today in people giving credence and bucketfuls of money to so-called "Christian" prophets promising health and wealth. There are even large networks of supposedly Christian prophets today, with many devoted followers, despite many of their prophecies failing to come true.

But "wheelin' and dealin'" in prophecy is a money maker, exploiting the fears and worries people have about the future by feeding people's desire for "inside knowledge" or dreams of a wonderful physical future being fulfilled, which are not what Christianity is about. It's all typical instead of a culture bent on selfish pursuits and money, that not only reveals the people perpetrating this nonsense as fake Christians, but also those taken in by it.

No wonder the Holy Spirit chose Lydia as the first person to spark the gospel in Europe, because it was "the Lord" who genuinely came first in her life, not money.

But notice how the slave girl sounded like a good Christian, because in **verse 17** “she followed Paul and the rest of us shouting, ‘These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.’”

Well, we know this was a load of rubbish, because this poor girl had no clue who the Most High God was, nor did she have any background knowledge for identifying a true servant of God. And when she says they’re “telling you the way to be saved,” she certainly wasn’t talking about the salvation from evil Jesus had made possible, because the gods she knew were totally focused on the physical as the way of salvation.

But she had credibility because of her ability to predict the future, so when she spoke about Paul and his companions this way, people would see them as special too. She was making them into celebrities, in other words, which in that city would be taken to mean dispensers of health and wealth, a total distraction from what they were really there for.

And she kept this up “for many days” too (verse 18), until “Paul became so troubled that he turned around and said to the spirit (the same spirit in verse 16 that was enabling her to predict the future), ‘In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her.’” So we know for certain now that what sounded like the girl being a good Christian was actually a demon inspired deceit. It was all fake, a very clever fake, but revealed as a fake because at no point was she focusing people’s attention on Jesus. Instead it was making celebrities of people offering what the audience would take to mean as a way to more health and wealth, because that was their focus.

Well, if all this lifting up men as celebrities offering health and wealth sounds familiar, it’s because exactly the same thing is happening today, so take it from Paul that the source of it isn’t God. It’s like someone predicting physical blessings from tithing or a greater physical reward in the next life; it’s just another version of fortune telling, a dead give away that it’s not Christian.

So is the upset when the blessings don’t come, just like “the owners of the slave girl,” who on “realizing their hope of making money was gone seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities,” **verse 19**. They wanted to hit back at Paul for their loss of money, by resorting to a completely false accusation that Paul and his team had been “advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice,” **verse 21**.

So at this point the Holy Spirit isn’t only revealing who’s a fake, but what fakes do when their self-centred hopes and plans are thwarted.

And it soon gathers steam among all the other disgruntled people too, which today would be a firestorm on social media demanding punishment. And that's what happened too, in **verses 22-24**. Mob rule manages to get Paul and Silas "severely flogged and thrown into prison" under the watchful eye of a jailer who "fastened their feet in the stocks."

You'd think Paul and Silas would be disgruntled too at this travesty of justice, but here again the Holy Spirit reveals the difference between genuine and fake, because the two men aren't upset and instead, like Lydia, their focus is the Lord and "praying and singing hymns to God," **verse 25**. And imagine the triumph Paul and Silas could then have felt too, when a massive earthquake around midnight shook the building so hard it broke open the cell doors and the chains holding them (verse 26). But instead of them all rushing out the open doors in verses 27-28 and letting the jailer try to kill himself thinking everyone had escaped, Paul yells out: "Don't harm yourself. We are all here."

And now we see the result of genuine Christianity being displayed because the jailer, wondering how on earth he's going to come out of this debacle alive, is suddenly open to real salvation and the way to it (verses 29-30). Paul gets the chance to explain it in detail in verses 31-32, after which, at whatever unearthly hour of the morning this now is, the jailer washes their wounds, he and his entire family are baptized and he fixes a meal for them in his own home. And instead of feeling dread about his future he and "his whole family" are "filled with joy, because they had come to believe in God" - just like Lydia.

This amazing transformation in the jailer is a direct result of having the real way of salvation explained to him. So now we not only have the symptoms of genuine and fake revealed by the Holy Spirit, but the results too. **Fear and selfish concern about one's future are transformed into clear understanding of Jesus creating peace and joy.**

For the church through the centuries, therefore, this **tale of the two ladies** would be a great reference for identifying the genuinely Christian from the fake by both the symptoms and the results.

But the story doesn't end here, because we now see Paul in verses 36-37 not letting those who wrongly "beat us publicly without a trial" get away with releasing them "quietly" and a trite "Go in peace." He wants these pompous magistrates to come in person to the prison to escort them out, which would act as an open admission they had believed in a lie (verses 20-21) and allowed the mob to influence them. And the same goes for us Christians, because if we've been called out for falling for a fake Christianity, can we admit it personally and publicly too?