

Lesson 26: Acts 18:1-28 Jesus Christ and the New People of God

Introduction

Leaving Athens, Paul journey's on to Corinth. Corinth had a great trade location on the land bridge that connected the two peninsulas of southern Greece, the Roman province of Achaia. Corinth controlled two smaller port towns on either side of the land bridge, one leading to the Ionian Sea and out into the Western Mediterranean, and the other leading to the Aegean Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean.

Though they had been military, cultural and trade rivals the Corinth of Paul's day was more of a Roman city than was the free Greek city of Athens. That's because the Romans destroyed troublesome Corinth in 146 BC. The Corinth Paul experienced had been rebuilt as a Roman colony by Julius Caesar and established as the provincial seat of Roman administration in Achaia.

Paul will spend 18 months in this important Roman center and establish a thriving church that Paul later described as "enriched in all speech and knowledge ... not lacking in any gift (1 Corinthians 1:6-7)." And yet, the amount of text Luke dedicates to Paul's time in Corinth is shorter than the record of his time in Philippi and not much longer than his time in Athens, even though Paul only spent a few weeks in these cities. The brevity of this account, which covers a year and a half in Corinth, reminds us again that Luke is not trying to give us a full report of the missionary work of the early church. Luke is intentionally selective of his material. So, we have to ask, why these reports? If this is all Luke chooses to tell us about what went on Corinth, why this?

One thing we notice about Luke's reporting is that he seems to include every instance that Paul is on trial. He is creating a written defense of the Apostle Paul by showing how charges against him are regularly resolved. Disturbances do follow Paul, but Luke explains those disturbances. Paul was exonerated by the magistrates in Philippi; the charge before the city authorities in Thessalonica was shown to be a twisting of Paul's proclamation that Jesus is king; and Paul held his own among the philosophers gathered at the Athenian Areopagus. In this chapter, the charge brought to the proconsul of Achaia will be quickly dismissed. Making a written defense of Paul is one of the motivating factors behind Luke's selection of material. In this, his aim is not only to defend Paul for Paul's sake. In defending Paul, Luke is also providing a defense of the Gospel and of the Christian movement.

We have also noted that in each of the four movements of Acts Part V Luke shows us the Gospel in contact with Gentile politics, philosophy and religion. In doing so, he emphasized the Holy Spirit in Philippi, Jesus the Messiah in Thessalonica, and God, Creator of all, in Athens. Jesus is again declared Christ in the Corinthian synagogue, but what is the impact on the Gentile world in this section? What theological point about the Gospel is Luke making? That's not so clear.

In chapter 16, the unique message had to do with the leading of the Holy Spirit in contrast to possession of the slave-girl by an evil spirit. In chapter 17, the unique message had to do with reliance on the Word of God as the primary source of revelation about God. We believe and accept God's revelation in order that we might understand the world. The Bereans provided a contrast both to the less noble Jews of Thessalonica, who turned away from the prophetic revelation of their own Scriptures, and to the philosophers of Athens, who loved to develop old philosophies and discuss new teachings based on human reason but did so without any word from God himself.

Here in chapter 18, we see Paul once again entering a synagogue and proclaiming Jesus as the Christ. Then we see Paul on trial before the proconsul. But what is the unique message being developed in these accounts? What do the four episodes of chapter 18 have to do with one another? What specific theological point is Luke making?

One exceptional thing does happen in this chapter. Jesus communicates directly to Paul in a vision, and we get His words. I believe the unique message that Luke has for us in the account of Corinth is indicated by Jesus' words in the vision that Paul has of Him,

“Do not be afraid *any longer*, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city.”

When the Gospel of Jesus Christ comes into contact with Gentile politics, philosophy and religion, the resulting fruit is a New Covenant community that rightly bears the title, God’s people. Jesus Christ and the New People of God, that is the unique theme of chapter 18. The first half of the chapter emphasizes a new vision for who the Covenant people of God are. The second half of the chapter shows God’s protection and provision for this new community. Over the whole chapter we recognize the sovereign hand of God as the primary factor that brings the Church into existence and strengthens the Church to maturity.

We start with the two reports in Acts 18:1-11 and the Gospel’s definition of who are the people of God.

Paul’s Stay in Corinth – Introduction (Acts 18:1-11)

¹ After these things he left Athens and went to Corinth. ² And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, having recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. He came to them, ³ and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and they were working, for by trade they were tent-makers. ⁴ And he was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.

⁵ But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul *began* devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. ⁶ But when they resisted and blasphemed, he shook out his garments and said to them, “Your blood *be* on your own heads! I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.” ⁷ Then he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God, whose house was next to the synagogue. ⁸ Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized. ⁹ And the Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, “Do not be afraid *any longer*, but go on speaking and do not be silent; ¹⁰ for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city.” ¹¹ And he settled *there* a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

Aquila and Priscilla (1-4)

There are human reasons to explain how Aquila and Priscilla came to be in the city of Corinth at the same time Paul arrived there. The Roman Emperor Claudius issued a decree that banned Jews from Rome. “Claudius’s edict is usually connected with a statement by Suetonius, that he banished the Jews from Rome because they were ‘indulging in constant riots at the instigation of Chrestus.’”¹ It is quite possible that Suetonius’ information was not precise and instead of riots being instigated by Chrestus, the trouble had to do with argument among the Jews of Rome about Jesus Christ.

One consequence of Claudius’ decree was the relocation of Aquila and Priscilla to Corinth. That’s the human reason they are present to meet Paul. Though I would say the real reason, or primary reason, they are in Corinth is the will of God. Just as God sovereignly prepared ahead of time Lydia and the jailer of Philippi, Jason of Thessalonica, and Dionysius and Damaris of Athens, so too, as part of His preparation for the formation of a church in Corinth, God led Aquila and Priscilla to the city at just the right time to meet up with Paul.

I love that they are tentmakers. God provided Paul with fellow tentmakers who wanted to grow in their faith in Jesus, and God provided Aquila and Priscilla with Paul. We do not know for sure if Aquila and Priscilla were believers prior to coming from Rome or if they came to know Christ through Paul. Aquila, at least, is Jewish. We cannot be sure about Priscilla, since her name is not Hebrew, and she

¹ F. F. Bruce. *The Book of the Acts*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988) 347.

would have left Rome with her husband whether she was Jewish or not. The title, tentmaker, could be just that specific job or more likely indicated work with all kinds of leather.

Paul emphasizes his choice to work in both of his letters to the Thessalonians and in his second letter to the Corinthians. One reason he worked was to set an example to new believers; another reason was not to burden the people he was ministering to with the need to support him.

⁷ For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, ⁸ nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we *kept* working night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you; ⁹ not because we do not have the right *to this*, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, so that you would follow our example. (2 Thessalonians 3:7–9)

Paul's work is not all consuming. In his off hours, he pursues his ministry of the Word. Luke tells us during this time he spent his Saturdays "reasoning in the synagogue... trying to persuade Jews and Greeks."

Driven from the Synagogue to the House of Titius Justus (5-11)

Even though Paul did recognize benefits of having a job and working for pay while on the mission field, he does not establish an absolute rule here. When Silas and Timothy come from Macedonia, Paul stopped working at his trade and "devoted himself completely" to the ministry of the Word.

Perhaps Silas and Timothy were able to support themselves and Paul through their work. Or perhaps they brought with them a gift from Macedonian believers of the kind mentioned in the letter to the Philippians. Their presence does allow him to solve one of his problems. He does not want to ask for money from members of the synagogue or from the seekers to whom he is witnessing. He does not want that conflict of interest. He is willing to receive money from the established communities in Macedonia, but not here in this new church plant. But once he is able to devote himself fully to the ministry of the Word without being a burden, he does so. He pours himself full-time into his work of evangelism and discipleship.

Verse 5 very briefly describes the content of his message. Paul solemnly testified to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. This is the same message he reasoned and proved in Thessalonica. It's been the same message all along. Luke gave us an example at the beginning of the first missionary journey, way back in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch, of what that may have sounded like. And Paul probably changes his approach in the cities he goes to, but his core message does not change. The Christ had to come to die and rise again. Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ. And he was showing them in the Old Testament Scriptures the prophecies fulfilled in Jesus, explaining to them and proving to them from the Word of God.

⁶ But when they resisted and blasphemed, he shook out his garments and said to them, "Your blood *be* on your own heads! I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles."

In some other places, Paul was forced out of the synagogue. Here Paul chooses to leave. After weeks or months of reasoning, Paul sees no way forward. The Jews of the synagogue have taken a stand against Jesus and are making claims about Jesus that Luke considers blasphemous. It took some time to build up to this response. Paul is certainly used to Jews saying bad things about a crucified Messiah from the backwater town of Nazareth. But at some point, after weeks of reasoning, Paul felt himself hitting a wall, and he left them to their rejection of Jesus. When he says, "Your blood be on your own heads," he is not cursing them. He is pronouncing a curse or a judgment that is already on them. By their free will, they have rejected the source of salvation. Paul has pleaded with them from the Word of God. They have resisted. Paul says, "So be it. I will go. Know this. The decision you are making now is to take your life into your own hands. The wages of sin is death. You can either pay your own death penalty for your sin, or you can accept the gift of Jesus to pay your death penalty for you. Since you have rejected the substitutionary atonement of Jesus, your blood is not on Him. Your blood is on your own head. I am clean. I have done what I can do."

Even as Paul turns away, we can be assured that he does not do so satisfied and happy to angrily condemn the Jews of the synagogue. He will later write to the Romans in 10:1-3,

¹ Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for *their* salvation. ² For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. ³ For not knowing about God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God.

The direct approach in the synagogue has won some to faith in Christ, but no more. Paul's continued preaching in the synagogue will only solidify the bitterness of resistance. He must now turn to the Gentiles, but even in so doing, he hopes that more Jews will come to faith. Romans 11:13-14,

Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them.

This is what Paul does. He now commits himself fully as an Apostle of Gentiles to the Gentiles, but still with hope for his fellow countrymen. Verse 7,

⁷ Then he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God, whose house was next to the synagogue.

Did you catch that? Can you imagine that? You get what's going on? Paul says, "Your blood *be* on your own heads! I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." How far does he go? Next door. This is not even the church across the street. This is the building right beside the synagogue. And how do we think Titius Justus, a wealthy Roman with a home that can accommodate the "First Church" of Corinth, how do we think he came to be a worshiper of God? Through the Jews of the synagogue that meet next door. They are the ones who likely long before introduced him to Yahweh. And not just him. Luke told us that Paul was going every Sabbath to the synagogue to persuade Jews and Greeks. The term, Greek, here may mean Greek Greeks, though in all likelihood it means Romans whose culture is Greek, it's Hellenistic. Paul was reaching Greeks at the synagogue along with the Jews. They were coming every Sabbath to hear the Word of God because Jews had been inviting them for years to come and worship. When Paul leaves, taking Jews and Greeks with him, he goes to the house sitting right beside the synagogue.

Paul has drawn a very clear line in the sand. He has great sorrow for his fellow Jews who have not believed in Jesus Christ. But he is not going to pretend that their choice is okay. There are not two options, you know: if you want to, go to the synagogue, or you can come to our home church, both are fine. It is not okay that Gentiles continue to attend worship in a synagogue that has rejected the saving atonement of Jesus Christ. Paul is not just going to go to some obscure, you know, we'll take the east half of Corinth, you take the west half of Corinth.

Out of concern for every Jew and Gentile attending synagogue, Paul sets up a reminder of the critical need for every man, woman and child to come to faith in Jesus. Now, every Sabbath when Jews and God-fearing Gentiles go to synagogue, the physical presence of the Christians who meet in the house next door becomes a reminder that a decision must be made to follow Jesus or to reject Jesus. No one is neutral. You are either following Jesus or you are not.

You either believe that the Gospel is the way of salvation, or you reject that the Gospel is the way of salvation. And Jesus, not Paul, established this dichotomy.

³⁴ "Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ "For I came to SET A MAN AGAINST HIS FATHER, AND A DAUGHTER AGAINST HER MOTHER, AND A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW AGAINST HER MOTHER-IN-LAW; ³⁶ and A MAN'S ENEMIES WILL BE THE MEMBERS OF HIS HOUSEHOLD. ³⁷ "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. ³⁸ "And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. ³⁹ "He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it."

That's Jesus in Matthew 10:34-39. Jesus doesn't want children to truly hate their parents, but He is saying, "You children have a choice to make. Will you come away from synagogue into the new community of God's people? If you do, your parents will feel like you hate them. Your behavior will hurt them. But you are still responsible to make a choice for me regardless of how strongly your father or mother may be against your choice."

When it comes to the very heart of the Gospel, a decision must be made and that decision is of eternal importance. "He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him... this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. (John 5:23; 17:3)."

When Paul's ministry in the synagogue hit a wall of stubborn rejection, the best hope for the salvation of a remnant out of the synagogue for both Jewish and Greek worshipers was a separate formation of a new community that recognized the Lordship of Jesus Christ. And a remnant did make that decision. Luke gives us at least one prominent example.

⁸ Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized.

It is after this decision to gather believers in the house next to the synagogue that Paul received words from Jesus in a vision.

"Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city."

The word for, people, here is theologically tinged. I mentioned this when we considered the Council of Jerusalem in chapter 15. James said, "Simon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for his name." Under the Old Covenant, the people of God are always the Jews. The term for, people, in Greek, *laos*, is not used for non-Jews. Non-Jews are, *ethnos* - the nations, Gentiles. The Old Covenant conception of the people of God is represented in the synagogue of Corinth. The Jews are God's people. Gentiles are welcome if they will become Jewish.

God chose to introduce a new vision in the New Covenant. A remnant of believers from every nation is now invited in as "laos," as the people of God. They are not defined by a single ethnicity or culture. They do not join by losing or giving up their culture. They are a multi-ethnic laos. The many people that God has in Corinth are made up of various nations or ethnic groups. The move from the synagogue to the house of the Gentile Titius Justus is quite radical. How can the people of God meet in a simple home? It's just a home. Not only that, but it's an unclean Gentile home. How can Paul do that? How can that be the "people of God"? It's a radical move. What does Jesus think about it? What does Jesus think about leaving the synagogue and setting up the Church of His people in a Gentile house? Well, let's think through the vision because Jesus is speaking here. So, what does Jesus have to say? Let's unpack this.

When Jesus spoke to Paul, he began, "Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent." "Do not be afraid any longer" suggests that Paul was afraid. That's not the picture I have of Paul. I do not think of Paul as afraid. And I don't ever think that somebody needs to tell Paul not to be silent. I see him as boldly proclaiming the Gospel without fear. He can get stoned and thrown out of a city, and he gets up and goes back in.

Paul himself affirmed that, at times, he faced some kind of an internal struggle to witness, when, writing the Ephesians from prison, he asked them to pray,

...that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in *proclaiming* it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak (Ephesians 6:19-20).

What was Paul afraid of? What did he need prayer for? There are options.

The most obvious fear would be bodily harm. Paul has been beaten and stoned. He has been imprisoned. James was executed by Herod. So, that's a possibility. Jesus suggests this is a fear Paul struggles with when he says, "for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you." Why does Jesus say that to Paul if that's not something Paul would be afraid of?

I am not sure if Paul struggled with the fear of rejection or the fear of embarrassment. Those fears are more mine. I am way too concerned with how others perceived me. I feel like Timothy identified more with those fears. And Paul wrote to him,

⁶ For this reason I remind you to kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. ⁷ For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline. ⁸ Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with *me* in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God... (2 Timothy 1:6-8).

The internal fear of rejection or shame may have been true of Paul to some degree, though I see it more in Timothy. I think physical attack, imprisonment or death more likely the fears Jesus is referring to here.

There is one more fear I wonder whether Paul struggled with. As a leader, his decisions significantly impact individuals and the Christian movement as a whole. What he says and does affects how believers and non-believers perceive the body of Christ. Now let's think about this choice Paul has just made. Imagine the God-fearing Greeks who are attached to the synagogue and Paul has moved out of the synagogue into a home right beside the synagogue. And so, these God-fearing Greeks have a decision they now have to make because of Paul. Do they continue to attend the synagogue where they had built relationships with Jews that they considered to be godly men? Do they separate themselves from those relationships by attending the new house church Paul has established?

And what do other Gentiles believe? Those who reside nearby and business owners in the same quarter of the city where the synagogue exists? Or the family members and friends of the God-fearing Gentiles? They all know about the synagogue. They know there is one common voice, one voice, proclaiming belief in the Jewish God Yahweh. Or there was one voice. Now there are two voices: two voices that cannot agree on the interpretation of their own Scriptures. They are divided. Paul has initiated this division. And they might say, "The synagogue we get. It is a Jewish thing. It has always been a Jewish thing." They tell the God-fearers, "We thought it was strange you wanted to go there. We thought it was odd when you stopped eating pork and shrimp. We put up with your outdated views on sex and drinking. But at least we understood what you were doing, getting interested in this Jewish God. But now, you have given up even the credibility of this long-established synagogue. You are meeting in some guy's house, for goodness sake! You have got some new teacher who thinks he knows the Jewish Scriptures better than our Corinthian Jews know the Jewish Scriptures. But he meets in a Gentile house. And to top it all off, you are now proclaiming belief in a Jewish rabbi who was nailed to a cross, gods forbid! I could explain to my friends your weird attachment to the synagogue, but this makes no sense. And what happens when some new teacher comes from Israel? Are you just going to jump on the bandwagon with him, you know, hopping from one fad to another? What is going on?"

There is now a divided voice for Yahweh in the city. The same street. Two options. Paul made this decision. Paul chose to leave the synagogue. Paul could have respectfully distanced himself, but he did not. He chose to establish the new community right next door. This is all on Paul, this radical decision to separate and establish a new assembly in a way that very visible rejects the synagogue. The hurt relationships; the confusion among the worshipers of God; the increased complexity of the message to the world - not one voice but multiple voices; Paul's decision as a leader has serious consequences on individuals and on the Christian movement as a whole. And I wonder if Paul is asking himself with some fear, "Did I do the right thing?"

Thinking about Paul's fear, one commentator I read quoted 1 Corinthians 2:3 to show that Paul really was afraid of the physical harm he might experience in his ministry. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "I

was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.” It is a great observation. That’s a great verse to bring into this discussion because it’s Paul speaking about his time in Corinth. And he says, “I was in weakness and in fear and in much trembling,” but I think this commentator gives it the wrong interpretation when he thinks that fear and trembling is about physical harm. The phrase, “fear and trembling” for Paul communicates something else. It’s about his relationship to God and the seriousness of his mission. Here is a little more of the context. This is 1 Corinthians 2:1-5,

¹ And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. ² For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. ³ I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, ⁴ and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God (1 Corinthians 2:1-5).

That’s Paul’s fear: that the church would be built on the wrong, and it would be his fault, that their faith would rest on his rhetorical ability, on his reasoning, not on the power of God. This fear and trembling is not a fear and trembling of physical harm. This is something in Paul’s soul. It is a right awareness of the seriousness of his calling. He felt responsibility before God to preach Jesus Christ and Him crucified. He did not want a cult of Paul. He wanted real transformation through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He wanted true worship of God the Father. He wanted something with the strength to last, whether he was there or not. And he rightly understood the weight of responsibility on one who would stand up to proclaim the way of God, to teach others, and to call them away from synagogue. This is the fear and trembling that should accompany every preacher, every missionary who stands up to proclaim the Word of God and to call people to make life decisions based on that teaching.

Paul’s teaching and leadership has just initiated a separation from the synagogue to follow a new vision for who truly are the people of God. Jesus appeared to Paul after that decision was made, telling Paul, “I have many people in this city.” They are not just in the synagogue. I have people throughout this city. Jesus’ words are not only an affirmation to continue to proclaim the Gospel. It’s not only an encouragement that you’re not going to come to physical harm. It is an exhortation to continue to gather together the believing community from every walk of life in Corinth. Continue that what you are doing in the house of Titius Justus. Continue to gather there. Keep on going, Paul!

The part of the encouragement about physical harm is going to meet a very concrete need soon. A scary situation is developing in Corinth. A major problem is brewing. In Acts 18:12-28 we continue to follow the pattern of problem, resolution, and follow-up that we have seen in each movement in Acts part V. The problem this time is a charge brought before the provincial governor. This is the highest court Paul has faced so far. The problem and resolution are recorded in Acts 18:12-17.

Paul’s Stay in Corinth – Problem, Resolution and Follow-up (Acts 18:12-28)

Problem and Resolution (12-17)

¹² But while Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul and brought him before the judgment seat, ¹³ saying, “This man persuades men to worship God contrary to the law.” ¹⁴ But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, “If it were a matter of wrong or of vicious crime, O Jews, it would be reasonable for me to put up with you; ¹⁵ but if there are questions about words and names and your own law, look after it yourselves; I am unwilling to be a judge of these matters.” ¹⁶ And he drove them away from the judgment seat. ¹⁷ And they all took hold of Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue, and *began* beating him in front of the judgment seat. But Gallio was not concerned about any of these things.

A trial before Gallio is a really serious. This is not the city mob. This is not the local authorities with power to banish Paul from Corinth. This is the Roman governor of the whole province, whose verdict could have long-ranging effect on the Christian movement throughout the Empire. Gallio is a known

figure in Roman history outside of the Bible. His father, Seneca, was an influential politician. His brother, the younger Seneca, was a well-known Stoic philosopher. Gallio had already served a term as praetor of Rome, one of the highest elected positions under the Emperor. He took up his position in Corinth during the summer of 51 A.D. and seems to have left because of ill health before the year was out, so Gallio is very helpful in this that he helps us to date the timeline of Paul's ministry. This is 51 A.D. when these things are happening.

This trial would certainly cause stress, fear, and worry among the Christians of Corinth. The Emperor had recently decreed the exile of Jews from Rome. What is going to happen here? This trial is intended by Sosthenes to put a Roman target on the Christian movement.

But Jesus' words that Paul need not be afraid are immediately confirmed when, upon hearing the accusation, Gallio throws the case out of court. Sosthenes' charge that Paul "persuades men to worship God contrary to the law," sounds to Gallio like an internal issue of Jewish religion. The Emperor did not kick the Jews out of Rome because he cared about their theology. The internal decision among Jews regarding Christ had led to civil disturbance. That was the problem, not theology. Gallio does not see that here in Corinth.

"If it were a matter of wrong or of vicious crime, O Jews, it would be reasonable for me to put up with you;¹⁵ but if there are questions about words and names and your own law, look after it yourselves; I am unwilling to be a judge of these matters."

Gallio's rejection of the synagogue leader Sosthenes was abrupt enough to unleash a violent response from anti-Semitic Corinthians who began to beat him. The irony here is that Sosthenes, claiming to represent the true people of God, had hoped to use his influence to move the Romans to a violent response against Paul and against the New Covenant people of God. Instead, that violence falls back on him. Paul had said to Sosthenes in the synagogue, "Your blood is on your own head." And Jesus had said to Paul, "No harm will come to you." That is what we see happening.

God first gathered together a New Covenant people. Now He is protecting them and providing for them. This problem of the trial and the quick resolution brought about through Gallio shows God's protection. The follow-up report shows God's provision. This is 18:18-28.

Follow-up (18-28)

¹⁸ Paul, having remained many days longer, took leave of the brethren and put out to sea for Syria, and with him were Priscilla and Aquila. In Cenchrea he had his hair cut, for he was keeping a vow. ¹⁹ They came to Ephesus, and he left them there. Now he himself entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. ²⁰ When they asked him to stay for a longer time, he did not consent, ²¹ but taking leave of them and saying, "I will return to you again if God wills," he set sail from Ephesus. ²² When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and went down to Antioch. ²³ And having spent some time *there*, he left and passed successively through the Galatian region and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples. ²⁴ Now a Jew named Apollos, an Alexandrian by birth, an eloquent man, came to Ephesus; and he was mighty in the Scriptures. ²⁵ This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he was speaking and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus, being acquainted only with the baptism of John; ²⁶ and he began to speak out boldly in the synagogue. But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. ²⁷ And when he wanted to go across to Achaia, the brethren encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him; and when he had arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace, ²⁸ for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, demonstrating by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.

That's the whole account that Luke gives us of Paul's eighteen months in Corinth. In this follow-up section, Paul returns to Antioch. And God sends another powerful witness for Christ to strengthen the ministry of the church in Corinth. God provides.

Timothy and Silas are not mentioned in this account. They may have stayed in Corinth, or they may have returned with Paul. Silas is mentioned by Paul at the beginning of the letters to the Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians, but he is not mentioned later. So perhaps he completed this mission and no longer traveled with Paul. Timothy is going to reappear in our next chapter. Emphasis here is given here to Priscilla and Aquila who decided to travel with Paul to Ephesus, but they are not joining Paul's traveling team. They are going to be active in ministry in Ephesus without Paul, and we do not see any evidence that they left their work as tentmakers. Perhaps they were led by God to combine both their trade with the establishment of a believing community in a place Paul had not yet been, giving us a very interesting example of businesspeople in one local church who choose to participate in the missionary work of the Gospel by moving their business to another city, so that they may be part of a church plant. That's really cool. That's a challenge to everybody who is called into a vocation that's not full-time Christian work. How, as we're in our vocation, what is our part and how do we serve our local church, or how do we even serve the missionary work of the Gospel? Maybe we can participate in a new church plant?

Luke tells us that Paul cut his hair in the port city of Cenchrea as part of keeping a vow. This is not a Nazirite vow, because that would require sacrifice in the Temple. But it is similar in the cutting of the hair. Hair was cut at the beginning and the end of the vow as a visible reminder, or marker, for the duration of the vow. If this is the end of the vow, Paul may have begun the vow after Jesus appeared to him. In that sense, the vow would be a reminder to Paul of the promise that Jesus made that he would be kept safe and should continue speaking the Gospel. If this cutting of the hair is the beginning of a vow, it might have to do with a Paul's commitment as he makes his journey to Jerusalem, maybe even about his desire to go to Jerusalem and then to Antioch in return.

Paul had begun this missionary journey after the Jerusalem Council. He took the letter from the Council to Antioch and then he shared the result of the Council with the churches of Cilicia and Galatia and then, eventually, he got around to Macedonia, and Athens, and Corinth. So, Paul decides to go full circle. He is not going to go directly back to Antioch first but it says he goes up to the church after arriving in Caesarea, and that's got to be Jerusalem. You don't go "up" anywhere else, so he is going up to Jerusalem, then he goes down to Antioch, his sending church, and Luke even gives us here the beginning of Paul's third missionary journey. Very briefly: Paul starts off again, but I think that's to explain to us that Paul is not here. Paul is not in Ephesus. He is not in Corinth. He is off somewhere else doing the work of God.

Paul had stayed on in Corinth in response to the word of Jesus. But it was not Jesus' will for Paul to establish his home among the believers there. After 18 months, Paul makes the strategic decision to leave Corinth. Paul is a pioneer missionary. He only stopped briefly in Ephesus before he goes home. So there's some reason Paul wants to go back to Jerusalem, back to Antioch and do something there. He is going to start another journey. But for now, he has left the church at Corinth, and he even taken along with him the stabilizing factor of Priscilla and Aquila, and probably also Timothy and Silas. I wonder, after all of this, I wonder if Paul could look ahead to the absolute mess that the church of Corinth is going to get itself into before he gets back, the mess we read about in 1 Corinthians? If Paul could look ahead and see that, would he had ever left?

Well, yes. I'm pretty sure he would have. Paul has been in Christian ministry long enough to be fully aware of the mess that follows the planting of a church. It is a bit like having children. The majority of what we are getting here in Acts is the baby stage. The birth of every new church is just simply wonderful. Lydia came to Christ, and then the slave-girl, and then the jailer. And so, we have the birth of the church in Philippi. It's awesome! It's wonderful! How do you think those three got along later? Let's be realistic - a Roman jailer, a slave, and a Lydian businesswoman? I hope they got along great but, certainly, they had to have some growing pains to learn to love each other and to live together with each other in community. Of course, they got along in the beginning. They are all excited about their new faith in Christ, and they have this positive, grateful relationship with Paul and

Timothy and Silas, and everybody is happy. They've got other people instructing them and they don't have to take responsibility. But their growth pains are going to come.

Here in Corinth, we have the former head of the synagogue, Crispus, along with some Jews, and some God-fearing Gentiles, and probably some Greek philosophers, and a whole lot of pagans completely new to belief in Yahweh. Luke has just given us the birth story. And it is cool, it is great. There are people coming to faith and God protects them at the trial before Gallio. And it's wonderful, just like birth stories often are. What we do not get how these young believers are going to grow up. We are going to read about that in 1 Corinthians.

From infancy to childhood, maybe they're doing fine because when you are still children you have other leaders, you know, they're looking to other people to tell them what to do. But as they become kind of like teenagers, they are going to start to question their leadership, and they are going to start to act out. They are going to start to express their freedom in all kinds of ways, mature and immature. They are going to remove Paul from his pedestal. He is not going to be perfect anymore. Like when a son finally starts to see the weakness of his father but is not yet wise enough yet to see the strengths of his father. They will glory in their knowledge and their spiritual giftedness. We are so strong! Oh, to be eighteen! But they are also going to rip the church apart in their pride. And what's going to happen then? Is somebody with a strong legalistic hand going to shut down all the enthusiasm? Will they establish some kind of rut, get into some safe rut that leads them into old age? Or are they going to come out of their teen years with a new sense of responsibility and energy, much knowledge? And yet it's come to a new awareness that they still lack experience and wisdom. And might they mature further into older age as they enter into wisdom and knowledge but have the maturity not to lose the joyfulness of the Gospel, to maintain an appreciation of youthful energy without becoming indulgent on the one hand or cynical on the other. You know, will they mature? Will they grow up in Jesus?

As with individuals, the New Covenant Church will only truly grow to maturity under the freedom and responsibility of the Gospel of grace. Liberalism in theology and behavior cannot get you to true spiritual maturity. Legalism cannot get you to true spiritual maturity. The freedom of grace is the only path for growing up in Jesus Christ to be mature, adult children of the King. But it is not a guaranteed path. That's why so often it's not chosen. It's too scary. The freedom of grace is dangerous.

One thing that strikes me as very interesting is that Paul does not try to solve the danger by creating a hierarchy of organization or authority. That is one solution. Provide strong leadership for the church, they are too young to know what they're doing, we need a single head in each city who defines for them theology and practice and who reports to provincial and then global leadership, who we can remove when things go wrong. Paul doesn't do that. He does not go there. He does not clean up the potential mess of grace. He leaves the mess to each local body. If you are going to grow and mature, you are going to grow and mature as you take responsibility yourself. You have a group of local elders who are growing along with you. You have deacons in the church, men and women like Priscilla and Aquila who give significantly to the ministry of the local body. You are leaders and servants and the whole community, and you are responsible for the growth of the local body of Christ. The responsibility is not outside Corinth or above Corinth. It does not come from Jerusalem, or Alexandria, or Rome.

That is a scary kind of freedom. Will the churches of each city respond? No. Some will do well. Some will not. And you can't always tell who is doing well. Sometimes you have to do bad before you do well. Corinth will grow, fantastically gifted. Then they will become divisive, separating according to different parties - some follow Paul, and some Apollos, and some Peter. Paul will not give up on them. But he will also not have the authority to fire anybody. His influence will come through the preaching of the Word and the Spirit. If they respond, according to the working of Jesus in their hearts, then they respond. If they do not, they do not. Paul does not try to set up some way to force them. He appeals to them. And according to 1 Corinthians, he is really not sure which way it is going

to go. They may respond, they may not. And this may cause fear in Paul. But all he can do is plead his case to the believers in Corinth and leave the results in the hands of the true Head of the Church, Jesus Christ. In the case of the Corinthians of Paul's generation, we see maturity. 2 Corinthians reports that they did receive Paul's rebuke concerning their ungodly behavior and errant theology. They owned their problems, they confessed their sins, and they re-established relationship with Timothy and Paul, and they grew out of those rebellious teenage years and became fruitful again.

A strong hierarchy may have prevented the problems that rose up in that church. But we don't see a strong hierarchy in Acts. Freedom to make those mistakes and the responsibility to work through those mistakes is what provided the space necessary for Corinth to mature as a local expression of the body of Christ.

And in reality, Paul did not leave Corinth alone. The church was not the first church of Paul in Corinth. This was not St. Paul's. It was the church of Jesus Christ in Corinth. God led Paul out of the synagogue to found something new. But that was God. God brought them together. And God would look after them. He protected them when charges were brought to the court of Gallio, charges that could have shut them down. And He provided for them when Paul left with Aquila and Priscilla.

That's the end part of chapter 18. The follow-up to the story is that God did not leave Corinth without gifted leadership when Paul returned to Jerusalem and started his third missionary journey. God took Priscilla and Aquila to Ephesus while, at the same time, He was leading another young man in a different part of the Roman Empire, different set of unrecorded circumstances, and he led that young man from Alexandria of Egypt, the second largest city in the Roman Empire. That young Jewish man with a great Greek name, Apollos. He was eloquent, learned in the Scriptures, fervent in the Spirit, and teaching accurately about Jesus without ever having met Paul.

And yet, he still had some growing to do. So, God had him land in Ephesus soon after Priscilla and Aquila did. He was speaking boldly in the synagogue that Jesus is the Christ, which of course makes us think of a younger Paul. But he has some gaps. He had the baptism of John. We do not know much more than that.

So, Priscilla and Aquila confronted him after a synagogue service demanding that he stop speaking in the name of Jesus until he gets baptized appropriately and receives correct instruction from Paul, the true Apostle to the Gentiles. No. Not at all. They could have done so. And many leaders would have done so. You know, you have gaps! Shut up! Sit down! They did not. Priscilla and Aquila saw through Apollos' weaknesses to his real potential for the body of Christ. And they took him aside, not to rebuke him or to belittle him, you know, what are you doing, you young people? You always make mistakes! You screw up! I can't believe you said that in the synagogue! No. They took him aside to build on his strengths. Of course, he has gaps. That is the definition of being young. When you are young you have gaps. The text is careful to say that Apollos was already teaching accurately about Jesus. What he was saying was not wrong. He just did not grasp the full picture. So, Priscilla and Aquila took him aside and "explained to him the way of God more accurately." It's interesting language. He was teaching accurately. They explained to him more accurately. You can have gaps and be accurate. And in that you can then benefit much from older mentors to help you fill in the gaps and be more accurate.

I love that Aquila and Priscilla did not try to force their own agenda on Apollos, or what they thought Paul would want them to make Apollos do. They recognized that he was following the call of God to proclaim the Gospel. And they supported him in that agenda. And they instructed him graciously and respectfully. And when he wanted to go across to Corinth, they encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him.

This was God's plan for the church in Corinth. Everything was not dependent on Paul. Everything was dependent on God. And God has many people, many people. There is no one movement. There is no one denomination. There is no one great speaker or teacher. One of those people, Apollos, God brought to Corinth from Alexandria by way of Ephesus,

“and when he had arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, demonstrating by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.”

God has a new vision for his people that requires stepping away from the old wineskin of the synagogue into a new wineskin that welcomes individuals of all ethnic groups who have come to faith in Jesus Christ. God’s vision is for each local assembly to take responsibility to represent Him to the best of their ability as they continue to grow up in faith. Grace is messy. It is messy for individuals. It is messy for local assemblies. It is not controlled by law pressed down from a higher authority. Grace calls forth individuals to walk as adult children of the Father, taking personal responsibility for their own walk with God and for their local church, and trusting in the sovereign hand of God to continually protect and provide. The Church does not depend, cannot depend, on any one single individual. As Paul later wrote the Corinthians, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth (1 Corinthians 3:6).”

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 18:1-28. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Considering Paul’s experience with other synagogues, what circumstances do you imagine might have been present that moved Paul to leave with the strong words of “Your blood be on your own head.” What are some different feelings you can imagine Paul experiencing?
3. What kind of situation was going on for Paul when God spoke into it with the words of encouragement recorded in 18:9b-10? Were those words for the present circumstances or for the circumstances to come or for both?
4. What danger existed for the early Christian movement with Paul being on trial before the Proconsul Gallio? What worse case scenario could you imagine?
5. What kind of benefit came to the early Christian movement through the decision of Gallio?
6. What do you make of Apollos? What did he know? What gaps might he have had in his knowledge?
7. What stands out to you in the way Priscilla and Aquila interacted with Apollos?
8. Who has served the role of Priscilla and Aquila in your life?