

Sermon 1: Acts 18:1-17: Paul plants the Church in Corinth

OUTLINE

The City of Corinth
Paul's ministry in Corinth

INTRODUCTION

How do you function as the church in a pagan culture? How do you function in a church in a pluralistic culture? These are the challenges we face in the 21st century and the challenges the church in Corinth faced in the first century. How to be a Christian when the culture is hostile and the political powers at be are indifferent and not deferential. How to be pure when the culture around you is sexualized. How to stick to the truth when there are so many worldviews and schools of thought who boast wisdom and knowledge. How to practice freedom and holiness at the same time. How to be unified in a culture defined by divisions. How to be selflessness in a context of self-promotion. How to be reliant on God when the rage is self-help. These and more are the challenges that the Corinthian church faced and are addressed in Paul's letter to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians. Today we begin a new series in the letter of 1 Corinthians. You can already see how relevant the letter of 1 Corinthians is for us today. As we have done in the past, before we tuck into the letter itself we will look at the books of Acts and see how the church began as a way to introduce ourselves to this church and prepare ourselves for the letter.

We are looking at Acts 18:1-17. Paul is in his second missionary journey. Paul's second missionary journey you will remember began in Acts 15 with a disagreement between Barnabas and Paul about taking John Mark with them as they wanted to revisit the churches they visited in the first missionary journey. They went their separate ways and Paul went off with Silas, picked up the young man Timothy along the way, and then Paul had a vision where a man in Macedonia called to him for help. This set off a mostly Greek flavored second missionary journey. Paul ministered in Philippi where he was beaten and imprisoned; then they went to Thessalonica where the Jews stirred up the city against them that they had to be sent away by night. They stopped in at Berea but left when the Jews were agitating against them there. Paul then went on alone to Athens where he was met with polite indifference rather than Jewish persecution. Discouraged, alone, poor and harassed Paul arrives at Corinth. Here Paul finds an oasis and plants a church and spends 1 ½ years ministering in Corinth. After this he made a few pit stops in Cenchreae; Ephesus and Caesarea before returning to his home-church in Antioch. This trip took about three years from 49-51 AD. It was on his 3rd missionary journey when Paul spent nearly 3 years in Ephesus that Paul wrote the letter of 1 Corinthians. In Acts 18:19 you will see that Paul left Aquila and Priscilla in Ephesus. They encountered and discipled the great preacher Apollos who went to minister in Corinth. While Apollos was in Corinth Paul returned to Ephesus 19:1. It was during his stay here that he heard about the problems in the Corinthian church. In 1 Cor. 5:9 Paul speaks of another letter before 1 Corinthians, 'I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people.' Apollos had likely encountered some sexual immorality in the church and reported it to Paul who wrote a letter to address it. Added to this there were reports from Chloe's household of problems in Corinth 1:11, 'For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers.' Added to this they had written a letter to

Paul with some questions 7:1, 'Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." All of this prompted Paul to write this letter of 1 Corinthians to Corinth late into his ministry in Ephesus about 2-3 years after the church is planted.

We will now turn our attention to Acts 18:1-17 and look at it under two headings, the city of Corinth and Paul's ministry in Corinth.

The city of Corinth

V1-3, 'After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ² And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them, ³ and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade.' What sort of a city was Corinth? Corinth was the 3rd largest city in the Roman empire after Rome and Ephesus. It was a key port town between two Greek provinces. If you can imagine a long piece of land jutting into the Mediterranean sea, then at the bottom of this outcrop there is a thin land bridge which joins another large piece to the long piece. That is where Corinth was situated. It had been levelled in the past by the Romans, but was resettled by Julius Caesar as a Roman Colony in 44 BC. It was too important useful to be let go. Ships would have to weather gale force winds as they ventured around the southern point of Greece. They could avoid this by either dropping their goods off at Corinth that would take by land over 9 kilometers to another ship on the other side bypassing the dangerous journey, or by rolling the ship over logs over those 9 kms and get in on the other side. Corinth was not only well situated for trade, it also had a lot of natural resources. It had an abundant water supply and limestone and sandstone for building and trade. This abundance in opportunity led many people coming to Corinth to find their fortune. Corinth had the feel of a developing city with a lot of wealth around. It would have been a very cosmopolitan place with people from all sorts of cultures and religions rubbing shoulders. It was the TED talks capital as many travelling teachers came to impress people with their rhetoric for money, even training people in the latest techniques that could manipulate the crowds, this bred a celebrity culture around these travelling orators. Because it was a Roman colony with roman laws and civil structures, there would have been a very secure social situation giving stability for growth. Along with this idolatry would be woven into many aspects of public life. Old Corinth was famed for its temple to Aphrodite the goddess of love with its thousands of temple prostitutes. Sexual immorality became so connected with the city that to call someone a 'Corinthian' was the common way to refer to someone who was sexually immoral. On top of that every two years the Isthmian games, second only to the Olympic games drew crowds. These included chariot races, athletic races, the first female races were held here; trumpet and flute competitions, and even poetry readings, all in honor of Poseidon. Civic pride, idolatrous religion, consumerism, self-confidence and self-sufficiency, competitiveness, class divisions, a sexualized culture, celebrity culture and a mix of competing worldviews, it all sounds so much like our modern world. This was the Corinth that Paul walked into.

One commentator describes Paul's journey from Athens to Corinth this way, 'Paul's journey was one of some fifty miles. By the end of the first day on foot, he would probably have reached Megara, but the second day's travel would have been more hazardous until he reached the outer bounds of the Corinthian *territorium*.

Soon Paul would encounter jostling crowds, the paved *diolkos*, and traces of the Games of a.d. 49. Finally, he would take the Lechaean road past markets and shops to the Forum. He would have passed the temple of Asklepios, the Peirene Fountains, and the triumphal arch. In the Forum he would have seen imposing administrative offices on the south side, and offices, shops and booths on the north. Traders, tourists, craftspeople, street hawkers, officials, messengers, slaves, and householders would have thronged the streets and Forum at busy times.¹

We see here that Paul encountered some fellow Jews, Aquila and Priscilla. These were converted Jews from Rome who had been booted out of Rome because of the decree of Claudius. If you remember this was because of Jewish riots over someone named 'Chrestus'. This was likely the Jewish opposition to the Christians resulting in civil unrest which led to the ejection of all Jews Christians or not. Paul sought them out because he was looking for a job. He was out of funds and needed to support himself while he ministered. Despite the fact that he could technically be supported by the young church he would plant. Given the culture of orators who would charge people money for their performances, Paul wanted to put distance between himself and them, not wanting to be grouped with them. They took him and he was able to support himself while he then focused on ministry, v4, 'And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks.'

Paul's ministry in Corinth

We want to consider Paul and his ministry in Corinth. Paul himself explains that this was a difficult time in his life, 1 Cor. 2:3, 'And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling.' On this mission journey Paul had already experienced a Roman flogging and imprisonment, as well as Jewish persecution on almost every leg of the journey. He had just had an underwhelming ministry in Athens; was travelling alone; was worried about the young Churches he was forced to leave behind as he fled from Jewish persecution and was waiting for news; he was out of money and would have to labor under the demands of being bi-vocational. Whether he was sick; or psychologically spent; or recovering from his physical beatings, we are not sure, but he was under duress. This is an important point to note. You will remember that the Greek missionary journey resulted from Paul seeing a vision and answering the call. He was squarely in the will of God, and yet he was suffering. This is important to note. We fall into an OT way of thinking that God's blessing always shows itself in physical health, plans succeeding and everything going our way. In the OT when God was manifesting His blessing in this way, that was a sign of His blessing for obedience to the Mosaic covenant. This is not the way God said the NT church will experience things. We were warned that we would be hated and persecuted, we are shown the devil cast down to earth and raging against the church, we are told to put on our armor and stand, being vigilant at all times. That being persecuted for His names sake is our blessing and honor, that it is granted to us by God. Being a child of God and doing His will does not guarantee that things will go well for us and everything will go our way. The book of Job reminds us of the greater war of which we are a part. Here is a holy man appointed by God for what he is doing and he is having a hard time of it.

1 Anthony C. Thiselton, [*First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 24.

This is not to say that it is all hard going, we do see that the Lord encourages Paul in several ways. We see the way Paul is provided for by means of opportunity to work as a tentmaker, but more than that he is given fellow Jews, fellow believers, fellow tentmakers, Aquila and Priscilla who will end up being fellow workers in the gospel as well. Paul after being traumatized is gifted with caring friends and provisions. This is compounded with the return of Silas and Timothy, v5, 'When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus.' Here were his ministry partners to partner with him in the work; they had brought back news from the new churches just planted with encouraging news and provisions from the Philippians, as well as long awaited news from the Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians were written by Paul while in Corinth and there you can see his painful waiting and relief when he heard how well they were doing 1 Thess. 2:17-3:5. Friends in the gospel, financial aid to preach the gospel, and good news of the gospel prospering in young Christians lives, Paul's gospel centered heart would have been running over with joy. This does raise the question of what brings us relief? When we are down like Paul what does it for us retail therapy or receiving a heartfelt gift; a movie to escape or sharing your pain with a believer; getting away from it all or going to church; money to go on a holiday or money to do another good?

What interests me in particular of the Corinthian situation is the fact that God told Paul he had many people in the city, and He would be with him; yet we see on the surface that things still go hard and are full of fighting and resistance. V6-8, 'And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." ' ⁷ And he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. His house was next door to the synagogue. ⁸ Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized.' As was Paul's practice in every town he preached to the Jews first and to the Gentiles, gathering them both into one new body in Christ, the church of Jesus Christ. Luke records a turning point when the Jews dug in their heels reviling Paul and would not believe. We see Paul shaking out his garments as a sign that he wanted nothing more to do with them, speaking words of warning that the inevitable judgement for this rejection would be upon their heads and not his. Despite this rejection we see God does save some of the Jews, there is Titius Justus a Gentile associated with the synagogue yet was not circumcised like Cornelius who was saved. his house was next door to the synagogue and became the new meeting place for the saints. There was Crispus the ruler of the synagogue, he and his whole household believed. We are given a quick summary in v8 that many of the Corinthians believed and were baptized.

There is much to focus on but let me emphasize just a few things. Firstly note the guilt for rejecting the gospel. As human beings we are sinners before God, yet He has made a way through the death of His Son to pay for our sins and make a way that guilty sinners can become forgiven children of God. God revealed His plan to do this over thousands of years through promises, types and prophecies. Jesus has come, died on the cross and resurrected. God has made sure that the eye witness account are recorded and the message of salvation has gone out. When we hear this message that God is willing to forgive sin, that He has made a way possible through the costly death of His Son. When we hear and reject this, it is very very serious. It is more serious to reject this truth than that

the world is not flat but a globe. Paul's warning is for us as well not to reject the truth of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Secondly, note Paul's sense of responsibility. As a man he knows the terror of the Lord in judgement and seeks to persuade others to flee the wrath to come. As a Christian the love of Christ for His church is shared by him and compels him to preach on behalf of Christ calling His bride to Himself. As a Jew he has a deep love for his own people and would if he could exchange his salvation for theirs, Rom. 9:1-3. But also as an apostle he has been given a holy charge, and woe is he if he does not fulfil that holy calling. Here with Paul talking about being innocent and the blood being upon their own heads, it seems that Paul sees himself in the position of Ezekiel who was called as a watchman to Israel, 3:18-19, 'If I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. ¹⁹ But if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, or from his wicked way, he shall die for his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul.' Paul feels himself to be under a tremendous sense of duty when it comes to evangelizing. This raises the question for us, are we under the same obligation to share the gospel?

As apostles, No; as evangelists, No, but as the collective church we are to be about being a witness in our neighborhood and to the nations. We are not all called to be a Paul, or a church planter or a missionary or pastor. But we are all called to be part of the local church which is committed to the task of bearing witness for Christ. This involves our paying, praying and voting for how money is put towards gospel efforts. We are all placed with family, friends and colleagues where God has placed us to be salt and light, to love our neighbor and share the word of truth. You may not be called to street preaching but we can all share the reason for the hope that is within us. Being wise as serpents and gentle as doves you can be praying for wisdom and opportunities with your loved ones to share the gospel. When was the last time you gave someone a tract, or steered the conversation towards the gospel, or invited someone to church, or read a book on how to share your faith? We may not have the same job as Paul but we believe in the same realities of heaven and hell, eternal souls and the exclusivity of Christ for salvation. How can they believe unless they hear, and how will they hear unless we preach?

We are told that Paul testified that Jesus was the Christ. This was the message of the gospel that Paul was preaching. The Christ or anointed One was a well-known figure that was promised by the OT. The OT promised a prophet, a priest and a king who would come to save His people and this was all pointing to the person of Jesus Christ. The Christ unfortunately was expected to be a political savior first and foremost and to make Israel free. But Jesus came first to save us from our sins by dying for their payment, from death by rising from death, and from Satan by making us citizens of His kingdom and extending His protection over us. We need Him as our prophet to declare the truth to us; we need Him as our priest to offer up His life for our sins; and we need Him as our King to rule and protect us.

We can also show that those who believe are identified with Christ and His people through baptism. This is the Christ appointed way for disciples to show their faith and unite themselves with the church.

V9-11, 'And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, ¹⁰ for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people." ¹¹ And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.' Despite the difficulties of being in God's will, despite the many discouragements and resistance we have this wonderful moment of comfort and encouragement. God gives Paul a vision. Now we should appreciate what Paul needed at this point. Every time the Jews resisted the gospel it usually ended in riots, and Paul having to flee. Corinth was at this tipping point, and it is here that God comes in to assure Paul. These assurances are good reminders for us as we face a similar task and challenges. Firstly notice that God calls Paul not to be afraid but to go on speaking. It is easy to be intimidated into silence. If people overreact to what we are saying we can easily be scared off continuing to speak. I think this has been adopted as a strategy by the left. Anytime someone with a message they don't like gets a platform start protest where you rage and shout slogans until you can stall the proceedings or get the establishment to issue an apology and policy change. Paul is told to keep speaking not because this is the smart political move but because God is with Him. God promises Paul protection, and tells Paul that He has many elect people in this city. Presence, protection and guaranteed results. What else could we ask for.

Friends we have been told that God is with us to the end of the age, that He will never leave or forsake us; that as far as our eternal souls are concerned no one can separate us from the love of God in Christ; and that when we preach the word of God is powerful to bring God's people to life. We are like the prophet that speaks to the valley of dry bones and because God is saving His people, because He is drawing them with His power, His sheep will hear His voice and come to Him.

Paul's ministry in Corinth is summed up by Luke with an example of God protecting Paul from the determined persecution of the Jews, v12-17, 'But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal, ¹³ saying, "This man is persuading people 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 wrongdoing or vicious crime, O Jews, I would have reason to accept your complaint. ¹⁵ But since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves. I refuse to be a judge of these things." ¹⁶ And he drove them from the tribunal. ¹⁷ And they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of this.'

Friends I hope that serves as a good introduction for us as we prepare to look at 1 Corinthians.