

Acts 18:1-21.

Power for a Consistent Witness

Jesus declared of those who place their faith and trust in Him that they are the "Light of the world," a light that cannot be hidden.¹ Light has complete and unimpeded power over darkness. Holy light exposes sin, and illuminates the way to the truth. What is the nature of the influence that you have over the people around you? If those around you were to recall the last encounter they had with you, what would be their testimony? How would people characterize you? Likely such adjectives as "friendly," "nice," "generous," "kind," and others might be used by those around you as they see you sharing your spiritual gifts and fruit. Though all Christians may not be specifically gifted as soul-winners, all Christians are active witnesses of their faith, whether they realize it or not. Unless we provide ways for the lost to hear the good news of the gospel message and give them an opportunity to respond to it, we provide the lost with little more than a nice memory, the lost remain lost, and satan wins the victory. So, though you may be characterized in a very positive light because of your faith, are you also known as a faithful witness who finds ways to give an account of your faith in a way that can draw people to Christ? Often we fail to take that step in our faith that moves us from caring to sharing, from sympathy to compassion, from works to words. We may fail because of a variety of fears: we may think we do not know what to say, we think we may be hurt by rejection, we may think we do not have the ability to make an eternal difference. We can come up with an entire litany of rationalizations that can lead us to fail to share our faith when we listen to fear instead of the words of the LORD when He said,

Acts 1:8. *But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.*

If you have taken the step of placing your faith and trust in God, you already have been given all of the resources you will ever need to be a positive and fruitful witness of the LORD in the community where you live, and in the region around

¹ Matthew 5:14-16.

you.² You have the resources to be witnesses to those people that you find the hardest to love. Finally, you also have the resources to be a witness to lost people all over the world as you take an active part in supporting the work of missionaries, or as you take an opportunity to travel in a ministry context to a location outside of your “comfort zone.” You also have the resources to witness to this lost world when you pray for those who are engaged in missions, and when you are willing to learn about missions activity and mission needs.

The primary resource we have to accomplish this evangelistic command is the power of the Holy Spirit to give us what we need when we need it. We also have the Word of God that contains numerous examples of witnessing and ministry that took place when the church was first established as well as containing the message that we wish to share. We have the examples and testimonies of countless missionaries who have dedicated their lives to the propagation of God's love. We may think of the Apostle Paul as a missionary, one who was characterized as a faithful witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ in an extreme range of circumstances. Though God may not be calling you to the apostolic ministry, Paul's experiences serve to teach us how we can be witnesses in a variety of situations. Acts, chapter 18 describes some of these situations, and reviewing Paul's experience at the end of his second missionary journey may give us some insight on how we may serve as more effective witnesses for Christ.

Acts 18:1. *After these things Paul departed from Athens, and came to Corinth;*

Paul has just left Athens following his testimony on Mars Hill where he presented the gospel to the Athenian “philosophical community” through his presentation of the statue “to an unknown god.” He is on his second missionary journey following the “Macedonian Call” that drew him away from his original intent to revisit churches that he had started on his first journey.³ Paul left Silas and his new apprentice Timothy in Berea, went on to Athens without them, and is now waiting in Corinth for Silas and Timothy to rejoin him. He has come from an inspiring experience in Athens and is now making preparations to visit Aquila and Priscilla.

² One way to think of the concentric circles of our relationships are in these four ever-widening groups: (1) Jerusalem: your family and community; (2) Judea: the region where you travel frequently, (3) Samaria: those whom you find hard to love, and (4) Uttermost: those outside of your area of immediate personal contact.

³ Acts 16:6-10.

Corinth was a place of such debauchery that the word *Corinth* was a commonly used adjective for sexual impurity. The words "Corinthian woman" referred to a prostitute, and a "Corinthian businessman" refers to a seller of prostitutes. It is to this community that Paul has come to bring the news of the Gospel. Often by its actions, the Church implies that its sole purpose is to share amongst themselves the gospel message within the walls of its church buildings. We expect people to be drawn into the church building where they can hear the gospel. The truth is that the church is called as salt and light to take the gospel to the lost world; to take it outside of the walls of the church facility, and it is to be taken by the members of the fellowship as they share Gods love with all of the people around themselves. This requires visiting with those who do not know the gospel. Paul's pattern of evangelism was to visit the urban centers, and Corinth, about 50 miles West of Athens was the largest city in the region.

Acts 18:2. *And found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, lately come from Italy, with his wife Priscilla; (because that Claudius had commanded all Jews to depart from Rome:) and came unto them.*

Rather than strike out on his own in this new mission field, Paul joined himself with the existing successful ministry of Aquila and Priscilla.⁴ This couple were Christian Jews who were driven out of Rome by the Emperor Claudius who followed Caligula in AD 41-AD 54. Where Caligula was best known for his gruesome treatment of both Christians and Jews, Claudius was less vengeful. However, the conflicts between orthodox Jews and local Christians caused such unrest in the Roman city that Claudius kicked all of the Jews (Christian and Non-Christian alike) out of the region. According to historian Suetonius, this took place around AD 49.⁵ Our knowledge of Aquila and Priscilla show them to be mature Christians who were very enthusiastic concerning their faith and very evangelistic in their efforts. Imagine the positive impact on their ministry that Paul's arrival must have had.

Acts 18:3-4. *And because he was of the same craft, he abode with them, and wrought: for by their occupation they were tentmakers.*

⁴ Aquila "a-KUL-ah" means "eagle", Priscilla "PRIS-cil-la" means "little Prisca", or "little woman."

⁵ Hoerber, Robert George. Decree of Claudius in Acts 18:2. *Concordia Theological Monthly*, 31 no 11 Nov 1960, p 690.

⁴And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded the Jews and the Greeks.

Don't be too dependent upon others; depend upon God.

The scripture describes Paul as a "Tentmaker," the same "trade" as Aquila and Priscilla. As a Pharisee, Paul had always been engaged in some form of a trade and used his "off" time to study and teach. This pattern of ministry never changed. Whenever possible, Paul worked at a trade and ministered as God provided opportunity. In this way, Paul was more like a lay volunteer preacher than what we would consider a traditional missionary or pastor by today's standards.

The English rendering of Paul's trade as a "tentmaker" may be unfortunate, and has led to an entire genre of commentary as to Paul's skill in the fabrication of leather goods.⁶ The rare term that is so translated does not imply in any way the making of tents, or even working with leather. The word refers to the working on the streets in a low-class, low-skill, low-paying form of handiwork, plying that trade in the marketplace along with others who were engaged in similar work.

Paul's was not a particularly respected enterprise. Paul chose to work in a trade that was common, one that was plied by slaves and those pressed into manual labor. This humble choice of "vocation" speaks to Paul's intimate understanding of the nature of the people to whom he would be taking the gospel: the Gentiles who are at the bottom of the social ladder of Greco-Roman culture.⁷ Paul came to depend upon his street craft to provide for his needs, choosing not to receive any payment from his "ministry."⁸ He did not accept a wage from the people of Corinth, nor did he do so from any congregation he was actively serving. However, he often accepted support from other congregations in the form of gifts.⁹

Why would it be advantageous for Paul to refrain from accepting a "salary" from the Church wherein he served? To do so would eliminate any possibility of his

⁶ Nestle, Eberhard. St. Paul's handicraft: Acts 18_3. Journal of Biblical Literature, 11 no 2 1892, p 205.

⁷ Lohr, Joel N. He identified with the lowly and became a slave to all: Paul's tentmaking as a strategy for mission. Currents in Theology and Mission, 34 no 3 Jun 2007, p 179.

⁸ 1 Corinthians 9:15-16.

⁹ Philippians 4:15-16.

receiving criticism of greed, and necessitated his reliance on God. We often make expectations of our pastors based upon an argument that wages are part of his "job", or "job description." By using such an approach we make the pastor our employee and rob him of his freedom to minister to us in the way that God has called him to do. Volunteer ministers, both laity and clergy, often have a flexibility of ministry and penetration into the hearts and lives of the people that a paid minister cannot attain. People who do not understand the missionary's heart may see a volunteer as ministering in sincerity, whereas the vocational minister does so out of obligation. They also fail to understand that the "wages" that are given to our pastors are not payment for services rendered: they are gifts given to the pastor to assist in meeting his needs, gifts given by the members of the fellowship to be used for the LORD's work. In short, the financial support given to our pastors is not a wage – it is a gift from God's own heart.

Work alongside others. Don't be a loner.

What did Paul have to gain by teaming up with Priscilla and Aquila? Paul received their shared home, and other similar resources needed for daily living; a central point of ministry; an established business within which to work; encouragement, testimony; etc., ... At the same time Aquila and Priscilla received encouragement, teaching/training, an expansion of their ministry into new areas, as well as substantial help in their business. Typically craftsmen would have a two-story dwelling on the city street where the lower floor was used as the place where their craft was exercised and their product was bought and sold. The upstairs was used as their dwelling. If this is the case, Paul would have worked with them in the lower shop, and stayed in an upstairs room.

It was never Paul's pattern to "go-it-alone" in his ministry. On his first missionary journey we may observe that Paul took along with him two capable others: Barnabas and John Mark. On this second journey, he brought Silas, Timothy, and Luke. None of us is probably strong enough in the ministry to be as effective working alone as we would be when working with someone else who shares our faith and our goals. What are some of the things we can or will do when working together that we might not alone? What are the advantages of working together? Don't ever be hesitant to ask one another to join you or lead you in a ministry effort. This could be as simple as visiting someone in the hospital, working on someone's house or property, counseling a friend, sharing a meal, or whatever

act of kindness that the Spirit leads you to do. When you share your ministry with someone else, everyone gains from the effort.

Don't be a loner. I was once criticized by a pastor for doing too much to "help" a small Christian fellowship with the overly sufficient resources the LORD had provided to my family in my professional career. He told me that I was (1) keeping the church from their responsibility to meet these needs, and (2) disallowing them from the blessing of taking part in the meeting of those needs. Include one another in your ministry and that ministry will grow, and all involved will be strengthened and blessed.

Acts 18:5-6. *And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded the Jews and the Greeks. ⁵And when Silas and Timotheus were come from Macedonia, Paul was pressed in the spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus was Christ. ⁶And when they opposed themselves, and blasphemed, he shook his raiment, and said unto them, Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean: from henceforth I will go unto the Gentiles.*

Listen to the Holy Spirit: Be flexible.

During the week, Paul worked with Aquila and Priscilla in their shop, and shared the gospel with anyone who would listen. On the Sabbath he would enter the synagogue, teaching and preaching to the Jewish community that gathered there, an opportunity given to him because of his status as a Jerusalem Pharisee, a status that he exploited to reach the Jews. Since he was speaking to a Jewish community, he often concentrated his message on the truth that Jesus is the prophesied Messiah. References to the coming Messiah were part of all of the bulk of the Jewish worship experience, and Paul's claim that the Messiah had already come was considered controversial at best, and blasphemous at worst. Though some Jews were convinced by his testimony, as with every other synagogue that Paul entered with the message, there was significant resistance raised by the more orthodox members.

Scripture describes the Jews as becoming "abusive," or "blasphemed." This was similar to what took place in Pisidian Antioch during Paul's first missionary journey, when the Jews conspired to have Paul discredited. The Jewish

opposition in Pisidian Antioch followed Paul to Iconium where they stoned him and left him for dead.¹⁰ Paul did something here that quelled the opposition: He "shook out his clothes." This was a symbolic gesture that was understood in the Jewish culture. Just as Jesus told the disciples to shake the dust from their shoes when they left the home of one who would reject the gospel,¹¹ the shaking of one's clothes expressed the leaving behind of the very dust on their clothes, taking nothing with them other than that with which they came. To the pagans, it was an insulting declaration of a refusal to accept the authority of their pagan gods. It was a permanent separation of relationship, tantamount to a disowning of any relationship in the future. By doing this, Paul disarmed the Jews by stating that he would have nothing more to do with the Jews or the synagogue. By rejecting the synagogue, he would no longer be a Jew, and no longer would be subject to their legalistic system. By removing himself from the Corinthian Jews, he would no longer be an existential threat to them.

Paul then quoted from Ezekiel 33:1-7. As God called Paul to bring the gospel to the Jews, he bore the full responsibility to do so; their blood was initially on his head. However, by their rejection of Paul's message, the Jewish Corinthians took upon themselves the responsibility for their own decisions, so a transfer of responsibility took place. Paul would not re-enter the Corinthian synagogue. This decision would ultimately serve to protect him from the Jews and further his ability to penetrate both the Gentile and Jewish communities.

We can learn an additional lesson from Paul's action here. Many times God calls us to a specific ministry for a specific period of time. We may fail to note when that time has come to an appropriate end. We get comfortable, or we find ourselves embroiled in conflict, as Paul did in Corinth. Like the frog who does not feel the warming waters of the cooking kettle, and ultimately dies of heat stroke, Christians often fail to recognize the time to let go of a task. They might not recognize that their work is completed, and God has another place or setting for them to serve. When they refuse to move on, they may become disillusioned, hurt, or burned out.

Acts 18:7-8. *And he departed thence, and entered into a certain man's house, named Justus, one that worshipped God, whose house*

¹⁰ Acts 14:19-20.

¹¹ Mark 10:14.

joined hard to the synagogue. ⁸And Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his house; and many of the Corinthians hearing believed, and were baptized.

Paul's pattern of evangelism changed at this point. In other cities, his rejection by the Synagogue always resulted in his being chased from the city. However, because he "shook his clothes," the Jews were not as likely to confront him. So, Paul was invited by Titus Justus to use his home that was located next to the Synagogue as a base from which to preach and teach the gospel. As a result of his gentler approach to evangelism Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, came to faith in Christ. Paul baptized Crispus himself.¹² Justus' home became a church that saw many of the people of Corinth come to Christ. So, now we have the First Christian church of Corinth that is nearly attached to the Synagogue, and its influence has reached even to its ruler.

There is no need to fear.

Acts 18:9-11. Then spake the Lord to Paul in the night by a vision, Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace: ¹⁰For I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee: for I have much people in this city. ¹¹And he continued there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

The conversion of the ruler of the synagogue produced no small stir in the Jewish community. As the unrest among the Jews increased, Paul certainly remembered the abuse he had often received at the hands of the orthodoxy. He was afraid. We may sometimes place some of the biblical personalities on some kind of pedestal, and consider them to be super-human or super-spiritual. Some people even go so far as to worship them and pray to them. However, the truth is that all of the people that we find in the biblical narrative are simply people, and are all subject to the same weaknesses as all others. It may be comforting to know that Paul considered the situation that was developing in the community, compared it with his past experiences and was afraid for his safety, and for his life.

¹² 1 Corinthians 1:14.

The scripture reveals here that the Lord, Jesus himself, visited Paul in a vision with the purpose of providing him with some reassurance. One of the traditional qualifications of a first-century Apostle is that they personally knew Jesus, and were called to the ministry by Him. Here is yet another occasion where Paul's apostleship is defensible. Jesus spoke directly to Paul to calm his fears. His first words are, "Do not be afraid to keep on speaking. Do not be silent."

Likewise, when God calls us to a task, we do not need to feel fear or anxiety because (1) the LORD has called us to the task, and (2), He promises to be with us.¹³ I recall a ministry that my wife and I engaged in that took place in Belarus, a few miles North of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor in the Ukraine, both former republics of the USSR. The area was still poisoned by nuclear radiation ten years after the reactor fire, and many in our group were afraid to enter the area and stayed back. I remember having no fear of the radiation because of God's clear call to go to this place. God has said He would protect us. One member of our group carried a dosimeter, a device that measures absorbed radiation, and after ten days in the region, it did not register any absorption at all. Some would argue that this is mathematically impossible. With God all things are possible. We stayed in the poisoned area for ten winter days. Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and one-half, a period that is most likely about half of the length of his second missionary journey.

As a result of his persistence, some Jews and many Gentiles came to know Christ in this large Greek city. It is this city that is the recipient of the two Corinthian letters that are part of the New Testament Canon. We see that Paul started a large Christian community that was not without its problems, but was still a place where the gospel was being spread throughout the region. Paul's persistence was empowered by his trust in God for his protection.

Acts 18:12-17. *And when Gallio was the deputy of Achaia, the Jews made insurrection with one accord against Paul, and brought him to the judgment seat, ¹³Saying, This fellow persuades men to worship God contrary to the law. ¹⁴And when Paul was now about to open his mouth, Gallio said unto the Jews, If it were a matter of wrong or wicked lewdness, O ye Jews, reason would that I should bear with you: ¹⁵But if it be a question of words and names, and of your law,*

¹³ Joshua 1:9.

look ye to it; for I will be no judge of such matters. ¹⁶And he drove them from the judgment seat. ¹⁷Then all the Greeks took Sosthenes, the chief ruler of the synagogue, and beat him before the judgment seat. And Gallio cared for none of those things.

Paul did experience one event of persecution in Corinth at the hands of the Jewish orthodoxy. Corinth was governed by Rome through the authority of a proconsul, much like the governance that we were introduced to in Paul's first missionary journey to Cyprus. Since Paul was no longer associated with the synagogue due to his "shaking of his clothes," the Jews conspired to use the Roman government in their attempt to have Paul's ministry destroyed. They forcefully brought Paul before Gallio, the Roman Proconsul who immediately saw through the hypocrisy of their actions. Sosthenes succeeded Crispus as the chief ruler of the synagogue who gave up his position to follow Paul. Sosthenes led the charge that Paul had been inciting people to break the laws concerning sedition, a crime punishable by death in the Roman system. However, Gallio could easily discern that the laws the religious leaders referred to were related to their own church tradition, and not the law of Rome, so Gallio summarily dismissed their charges.

Though the text does not give the details, there must have been no little resistance to the Roman judgment since all biblical translations refer to the necessity to drive the orthodox Jews out of the court. The court of the proconsul was held outdoors on a raised platform in the middle of the marketplace, so when the Romans had to drive the Jews from the platform, it was witnessed by the entire community. Also, the false charges that the Jews brought before Gallio still required adjudication by Rome. Sosthenes, the chief of the synagogue was brought before Gallio and beat with 39 lashes, further discrediting the Jews among the people, and their ability to raise more public opposition to Paul was neutralized. This allowed Paul's ministry in Corinth to thrive. Paul would leave Corinth on his own: a relatively new concept in his missionary pattern.

Acts 18:18. And Paul after this tarried there yet a good while, and then took his leave of the brethren, and sailed thence into Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila; having shorn his head in Cenchrea: for he had a vow.

Be trained, train and encourage others.

When Paul felt the call to leave for Syria, returning to his home base of Antioch, he took Priscilla and Aquila with him instead of Timothy and Silas. After eighteen months with Paul, Priscilla and Aquila had an opportunity for some missionary "on-the-job training." Paul intended upon passing through Ephesus where Priscilla and Aquila would be able to help there in the same way that Paul was able to help them in Corinth.

When you are confident in a ministry activity, invite someone to go with you who is less confident. What happens when you do this? By including others in your work of ministry, those others are strengthened and become better ministers themselves, adding substantially to the work done for God's kingdom. Again, we see that Paul's persistence in the ministry continually included training others.

Cenchrea is the sea port that supports Corinth. There is much debate concerning the reference to the cutting of hair. This act was performed as part of the Nazirite vow, a Jewish custom that is a testimony of a renewed commitment to God. Scholars argue, based upon the grammar, that it is Aquila who shaved his head. Orthodox tradition holds that it was Paul. Scholars agree that this is a reasonable act for Aquila, and an unlikely one for Paul. Though it is the opinion of this author that, due to the grammar and context of the passage it was indeed Aquila who shaved his head as a renewed commitment to the LORD, there will be no effort here to resolve this issue.

Acts 18:19-21. *And he came to Ephesus, and left them there: but he himself entered into the synagogue, and reasoned with the Jews. ²⁰When they desired him to tarry longer time with them, he consented not; ²¹But bade them farewell, saying, I must by all means keep this feast that cometh in Jerusalem: but I will return again unto you, if God will. And he sailed from Ephesus.*

The pattern that Paul established in Corinth he continued to use as he concluded his second missionary journey returning to Antioch. From Paul's experience we can learn some truths that apply to our call to bring a persistent witness to the community around us. (1) When we encounter strong resistance to our witness, it is best to counter it with wisdom rather than force. Wisdom might lead us to

apply our witness elsewhere. (2) We should never completely give up in our attempts to bring God's love to anyone. Even when it is necessary to move on, our love for those we leave behind should never wane. (3) The results of our testimony are not our responsibility, but are rather the responsibility of those to whom we testify, and the fruit of that testimony is in God's hands, not ours. (4) God will protect us as we seek to minister His work in the world.

The spread of the gospel has always lost ground against a growing population. There are far more people who die within the geographical area of our churches than there are those who come to Christ. Knowing this pattern, Jesus said,

Matthew 9:37-38. *The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few; Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest.*

Christians are called to serve as laborers in the harvest. We can take part in that harvest by praying for the lost, by learning about the need and how to serve as a laborer, we can contribute to the costs of reaching the lost, and we can go into the harvest field. We do this because we have been invited by the LORD to be part of his ultimate purpose: to reach a lost world for Himself. This passage gives us some very practical advice:

- **Don't be too dependent upon others; depend fully upon God.**
- **Work alongside others. Don't be a loner.**
- **Listen to the Holy Spirit: Be flexible.**
- **There is no need to fear.**
- **Be trained, train and encourage others.**