***Priscilla and Aquila in Corinth***

**Summer 2022, Acts 18:1-22 August 14, 2022**

***When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom  
as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved   
to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.   
I came to you in weakness and fear, with much trembling.*1 Corinthians 2:1-3**

**Introduction to Corinth**

*After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. 2 There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, 3 and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. 4 Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.*

*5 When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. 6 But when the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.”*

*7 Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God.   
 8 Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized.*

Acts 18:1-8

1. Corinth’s history reflects the cosmopolitan, proud, even hedonistic, values of Greek/Roman culture

2. The new church in Corinth reflected those same elements of the culture – read 1 Corinthians!

**Paul still needed to be encouraged**

*9 One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. 10 For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.” 11 So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.*

Acts 18:9-11

1. The arrival of a gift from Philippi, news from Thessalonica and a word from God energized Paul   
for his most difficult ministry

2. The biggest encouragement for Paul was people: Aquila and Priscilla, Silas and Timothy, Justus

**Why Priscilla and Aquila are so important**

*18 Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchrea because of a vow he had taken. 19 They arrived at Ephesus, where Paul left Priscilla and Aquila. He himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. 20 When they asked him to spend more time with them, he declined. 21 But as he left, he promised, “I will come back if it is God’s will.” Then he set sail from Ephesus. 22 When he landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church and then went down to Antioch.*

Acts 18:18-22

1. Priscilla and Aquila (yes, Luke is a VERY careful writer) represent the second generation of leaders in the early church

2. Paul’s strategy is going to shift from “new fields” to clustering, equipping and writing

**What was on Paul’s heart when he left Corinth**

1. Unity is a “power of the cross” issue for the church

*10 I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. 11 My brothers, some from Chloe’s household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. 12 What I mean is this: One of you says, “I follow Paul”; another, “I follow Apollos”; another, “I follow Cephas”; still another, “I follow Christ.”*

*13 Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? 14 I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, 15 so no one can say that you were baptized into my name. 16 (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don’t remember if I baptized anyone else.) 17 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.*

1 Corinthians 1 (see 1 Peter 5:10 for God’s part in “perfectly uniting” the church)

2. The church must be radically separate from the immoral, greedy . . . . culture that surrounds it

*It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans . . . .*

*9 I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— 10 not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. 11 But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat.*

*12 What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? 13 God will judge those outside. “Expel the wicked man from among you.”*

1 Corinthians 5 [with the final quote repeated several places in Deuteronomy]

**Resources for further studies in Acts**

The Bible Project team has great stuff on Acts at [*https://open.life.church/items/179224-poster-jpg*](https://open.life.church/items/179224-poster-jpg)

Spurgeon*'s* very good sermon on Acts 17 is at [*https://www.biblebb.com/files/spurgeon/0193.htm*](https://www.biblebb.com/files/spurgeon/0193.htm)

Tim Keller has said much on the topic of mission.  See “5 Practices” at [*https://brave.is/5-practices-of-a-missional-church-tim-keller/*](https://brave.is/5-practices-of-a-missional-church-tim-keller/)and [*https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/gospel-culture-and-mission-an-interview-with-tim-keller/*](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/gospel-culture-and-mission-an-interview-with-tim-keller/)

D. A. Carson has a wonderful essay from Acts 17 on “Worldview Evangelism” at [*https://www.monergism.com/athens-revisited-exegetical-study-acts-17-da-carson*](https://www.monergism.com/athens-revisited-exegetical-study-acts-17-da-carson)

Deffinbaugh has an audio only message on Acts 17 at [*https://bible.org/series/studies-book-acts*](https://bible.org/series/studies-book-acts) His semon on Acts 18 is at [*https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197*](https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197)

I borrowed from this John Piper message on missions: [*https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-supremacy-of-god-in-missions*](https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-supremacy-of-god-in-missions)

For those who want to dig deeper into the worldview clash at Mars Hill, I recommend Andrew Klavan’s challenging “Speaking Truth into Modern Culture” at [*https://youtu.be/Cckiti7as44*](https://youtu.be/Cckiti7as44)

John Stott’s *The Spirit, The Church and the World: The Message of Acts* (IVP, 1990) and F. F. Bruce’s work: *New Testament History* (Doubleday, 1980) and *The Book of the Acts* (Eerdmans, 1984). For this passage, I also like Kistemaker’s commentary (Baker Book House, 1990).

Harry Boer, *That My House May Be Filled* (Eerdmans, 1957)

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# 5 Practices of a Missional Church

### Tim Keller at [*https://brave.is/5-practices-of-a-missional-church-tim-keller/*](https://brave.is/5-practices-of-a-missional-church-tim-keller/)

In the West, for nearly a thousand years, the relationship of European Christian churches to the broader culture was a relationship known as Christendom. The institutions of society “Christianized” people and stigmatized non-Christian belief and behavior.

British missionary, Lesslie Newbigin, went to India [in 1936]. When he returned to England, some thirty years later, he discovered that the Western church now found itself in a non-Christian society, but it had not adapted to its new situation. While most traditional evangelical churches can win the temperamentally conventional and conservative to Christ, American author Michael Wolff notes that this market is shrinking. If evangelical churches settle the decline in numbers, with the remaining Christian body not becoming missional, they will decline and die. This has instituted an even greater need for “missional” churches, which adopt the following practices:

**1. Speak in the vernacular**

In Christendom, technical biblical terms are well known inside and outside of the church. In a missional church, however, these terms must be explained.

The missional church:

* avoids “tribal” language, stylized prayer language, and evangelical jargon that seeks to set a spiritual tone.
* avoids “we-they” language, disdainful jokes that mock people of different politics and beliefs
* avoids sentimental, pompous, “inspirational” talk
* avoids talking as if non-believers were not present

**2. Enter and retell the culture’s stories with the Gospel**

In Christendom, it is possible to simply exhort Christianized people to do what they know they should. There is little or no real engagement, listening, or persuasion. Often, along with exhortation, there is a heavy reliance on guilt to motivate behavior change.

In a missional church, preaching and communication always assume skeptics are present and consequently engages their stories. To enter the culture’s stories mean showing sympathy towards and deeply acquainting with literature, music, theatre, and other arts expressing the existing hopes, dreams, heroic narratives and fears. To retell the culture’s stories is to show how only in Christ can we have freedom without slavery and embrace-of-the-other without injustice.

**3. Theologically train laypeople for public life and vocation**

In a missional church, laypeople need theological education to “think Christianly” about everything and work with Christian distinctiveness. They need to know three things: (a) which cultural practices manifest common grace and are to be embraced, (b) which practices are antithetical to the Gospel and must be rejected, and (c) which practices can be adapted/revised.

Christians will have to use the Gospel to demonstrate true, biblical love and tolerance in the public square towards those with whom we deeply differ. This tolerance should equal or exceed that which groups with opposing views show towards Christians. The charge of intolerance is perhaps the main “defeater” of the Gospel in the non-Christian West.

**4. Create Christian community that is countercultural and counterintuitive**

In Christendom, “fellowship” is basically just a set of nurturing relationships, support, and accountability.

In a missional church, however, Christian community must go beyond that to embody a counterculture, showing the world how radically different a Christian society is with regard to sex, money, and power.

* *In sex*. We avoid both the secular society’s idolization of sex and traditional society’s fear of sex. We also exhibit love rather than hostility or fear toward those whose sexual life-patterns are different from ours.
* *In money*. We promote a radically generous commitment of time, money, relationships, and living space to social justice and the needs of the poor, the immigrant, and the economically and physically weak.
* *In power*. We are committed to power sharing and relationship building among races and classes that are alienated outside of the body of Christ. A missional church must be deeply and practically committed to deeds of compassion and social justice and deeply and practically committed to evangelism and conversion.

**5. Practice Christian unity as much as possible on the local level**

It is very important that we do not spend time bashing and criticizing other kinds of churches. That criticism simply plays into the common “defeater” that Christians are all intolerant. While we align ourselves in denominations that share many of our distinctives, at the local level we should cooperate with, reach out to, and support the other congregations and churches in our area. This will raise many thorny issues, of course, but our bias should be in the direction of cooperation.



# Acts Timeline (ESV Study Bible)

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# Seeing Paul in Perspective (Acts 18:1-19:7)

Deffinbaugh at [*https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197*](https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197)

1 After this Paul departed from Athens and went to Corinth. 2 There he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to depart from Rome. Paul approached them, 3 and because he worked at the same trade, he stayed with them and worked with them (for they were tentmakers by trade). 4 He addressed both Jews and Greeks in the synagogue every Sabbath, attempting to persuade them. 5 Now when Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul became wholly absorbed with proclaiming the word, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. 6 When they opposed him and reviled him, he protested by shaking out his clothes and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am guiltless! From now on I will go to the Gentiles!” 7 Then Paul left the synagogue and went to the house of a person named Titius Justus, a Gentile who worshiped God, whose house was next door to the synagogue. 8 Crispus, the president of the synagogue, believed in the Lord together with his entire household, and many of the Corinthians who heard about it believed and were baptized. 9 The Lord said to Paul by a vision in the night, “Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent, 10 because I am with you, and no one will assault you to harm you, because I have many people in this city.” 11 So he stayed there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. 12 Now while Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews attacked Paul together and brought him before the judgment seat, 13 saying, “This man is persuading people to worship God in a way contrary to the law!” 14 But just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to the Jews, “If it were a matter of some crime or serious piece of villainy, I would have been justified in accepting the complaint of you Jews, 15 but since it concerns points of disagreement about words and names and your own law, settle it yourselves. I will not be a judge of these things!” 16 Then he had them forced away from the judgment seat. 17 So they all seized Sosthenes, the president of the synagogue, and began to beat him in front of the judgment seat. Yet none of these things were of any concern to Gallio. 18 Paul, after staying many more days in Corinth, said farewell to the brothers and sailed away to Syria accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. He had his hair cut off at Cenchrea because he had made a vow. 19 When they reached Ephesus, Paul left Priscilla and Aquila behind there, but he himself went into the synagogue and addressed the Jews. 20 When they asked him to stay longer, he would not consent, 21 but said farewell to them and added, “I will come back to you again if God wills.” Then he set sail from Ephesus, 22 and when he arrived at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church at Jerusalem and then went down to Antioch. 23 After he spent some time there, Paul left and went through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples. 24 Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, arrived in Ephesus. He was an eloquent speaker, well-versed in the scriptures. 25 He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and with great enthusiasm he spoke and taught accurately the facts about Jesus, although he knew only the baptism of [John. 26](javascript:%7b%7d) He began to speak out fearlessly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the way of God to him more accurately. 27 When Apollos wanted to cross over to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he assisted greatly those who had believed by grace, 28 for he refuted the Jews vigorously in public debate, demonstrating from the scriptures that the Christ was Jesus. 1 While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul went through the inland regions and came to Ephesus. He found some disciples there 2 and said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” They replied, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” 3 So Paul said, “Into what then were you baptized?” “Into John’s baptism,” they replied. 4 Paul said, “John baptized with a baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.” 5 When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, 6 and when Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they began to speak in tongues and to prophesy. 7 (Now there were about twelve men in all.) ([Acts 18:1](javascript:%7b%7d)—19:7)[1](https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197" \l "P10_4699)

### Introduction[2](https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197" \l "P12_5603)

People are not always what they appear to be. A number of years ago, I arrived in India for the first time. My letter, which contained my airline flight and arrival information, arrived in India a couple of weeks after I did, so I was all alone for a number of hours. When I finally was able to contact someone in India, I was told that I was to meet a very well-known speaker from the United States, and I would then travel with him. He was staying at the local YMCA, so I took a taxi to meet him there. Having never met this well-known preacher, I had a certain picture in my mind as to what this meeting would be like. It didn’t turn out exactly as I had expected. No, it didn’t turn out anything like I had expected. When I arrived at the YMCA, I learned the number of the room in which this man was staying. When I arrived at the door it was wide open, and he was lying there, on top of the bed, in just his underwear.

Now, there was certainly nothing indecent about this. It was the YMCA, a place for men only. And the speaker whom I was to meet was certainly decent. I should add that the reason for his attire was that it was very warm and humid in Bombay, and there was no air conditioning. It was the only way to cool down, as this fellow had learned from past experience. Somehow, though, this mental picture will always be in my mind’s eye. I found it a little difficult to be awestruck by a dignitary in his underwear!

You may be wondering what all this has to do with our text in [Acts 18](javascript:%7b%7d). Like the fellow I was to meet in Bombay, Paul was a man of great standing. From our reading in the Gospels, we have come to look upon Peter (not to mention the other disciples of our Lord) as a man who has “feet of clay.” We have seen him put his foot in his mouth a number of times. We have observed him acting too hastily, and sometimes rashly. We have even heard him deny knowing the Savior. But somehow we think of Paul differently. We think of him as a man who is incapable of feeling or acting as we might.

[Acts 18](javascript:%7b%7d) is one place where the human side of Paul is revealed to the reader. Specifically, our text makes it clear that Paul had fears, just like we do. I know this because God Himself tells us so:

9 The Lord said to Paul by a vision in the night, “Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent, 10 because I am with you, and no one will assault you to harm you, because I have many people in this city” ([1 Corinthians 18:9-10](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Surely our God knows the hearts of His people, and thus if God found it necessary to encourage Paul and to instruct him not to fear, and not to be silent regarding the gospel, then Paul must have had fears and must have contemplated keeping quiet regarding the gospel.

I believe that our text is important for several reasons. *First* of all, it is fascinating reading. God works in amazing ways, and our text is surely an example of this. *Second*, this passage portrays Paul in terms we can identify with, like we identify with Peter. *Third*, this text helps us to put Paul’s life and ministry into perspective. So join me as we seek to understand this text and its implications and applications for our own lives.

#### From Athens to Corinth [Acts 18:1-4](javascript:%7b%7d)

1 After this Paul departed from Athens and went to Corinth. 2 There he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to depart from Rome. Paul approached them, 3 and because he worked at the same trade, he stayed with them and worked with them (for they were tentmakers by trade). 4 He addressed both Jews and Greeks in the synagogue every Sabbath, attempting to persuade them ([Acts 18:1-4](javascript:%7b%7d)).

You will remember that when Paul left Berea and traveled on to Athens, he left Silas and Timothy behind in Berea, with instructions to join him as soon as possible ([Acts 17:14-15](javascript:%7b%7d)). When Paul came to Corinth, he was still alone in verses 1-4. He was not alone for long, however, because he encountered a Jewish couple (Aquila and Priscilla) who, like him, were tentmakers by trade. They had recently lived in Rome, but were expelled by the edict of Claudius along with all the other Jews. Paul worked during the day, but on the Sabbath, he went to the synagogue, where he would proclaim the same message he preached everywhere: Jesus is the Messiah whose suffering, death, and resurrection the Old Testament prophets foretold.

On the surface, verses 1-4 do not seem all that significant. But upon further reflection, we should see that they help to explain and to illustrate Paul’s teaching elsewhere. For example, think of Paul’s first Epistle to the Corinthians – the saints of this very city. In chapter 8, Paul called upon the stronger saints to forego their “right” to eat certain meats for the sake of their weaker brother. In chapter 9, Paul demonstrates how this should work by citing his practice of working with his own hands, rather than to accept support from those to whom he ministered ([1 Corinthians 9:1-23](javascript:%7b%7d)). Paul is referring to the very thing Luke describes in [Acts 18:1-4](javascript:%7b%7d).

This principle is not just practiced in Corinth. We find several texts in which Paul refers to the same practice elsewhere:

31 “Therefore be alert, remembering that night and day for three years I did not stop warning each one of you with tears. 32 And now I entrust you to God and to the message of his grace. This message is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. 33 I have desired no one’s silver or gold or clothing. 34 You yourselves know that these hands of mine provided for my needs and the needs of those who were with me. 35 By all these things, I have shown you that by working in this way we must help the weak, and remember the words of the Lord Jesus that he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’” ([Acts 20:31-35](javascript:%7b%7d)).

7 For you know yourselves how you must imitate us, because we did not behave without discipline among you, 8 and we did not eat anyone’s food without paying. Instead, in toil and drudgery we worked night and day in order not to burden any of you. 9 It was not because we do not have that right, but to give ourselves as an example for you to imitate. 10 For even when we were with you, we used to give you this command: “If anyone is not willing to work, neither should he eat” ([2 Thessalonians 3:7-10](javascript:%7b%7d)).

From what Luke has written concerning Paul’s practice in Corinth, some have embraced what they would call “tent-making ministry.” They find a means of employment which enables them to support themselves in a certain place, and from this setting, they proclaim the good news of the gospel. This is now necessary in those countries which will not allow full-time missionaries. These so-called “closed” countries still need people who are highly skilled in medicine, public health, technology, or teaching English. “Tent-making ministry” not only reduces the financial burden on the church, it also provides a way for Christians to have contact with people in the workplace. Paul was years ahead of his time.

#### Ministry Modification when Silas and Timothy Arrive [Acts 18:5-8](javascript:%7b%7d)

5 Now when Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul became wholly absorbed with proclaiming the word, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. 6 When they opposed him and reviled him, he protested by shaking out his clothes and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am guiltless! From now on I will go to the Gentiles!” 7 Then Paul left the synagogue and went to the house of a person named Titius Justus, a Gentile who worshiped God, whose house was next door to the synagogue. 8 Crispus, the president of the synagogue, believed in the Lord together with his entire household, and many of the Corinthians who heard about it believed and were baptized.

While Paul is in Corinth, Silas and Timothy arrive from Macedonia. This enables Paul to fully devote himself to preaching from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ (verse 5). We are not told just what it was that enabled Paul to suddenly devote himself to preaching. But what Luke has not said here, Paul has written in his Epistle to the Philippians:

15 And as you Philippians know, at the beginning of my gospel ministry, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in this matter of giving and receiving except you alone. 16 For even in Thessalonica on more than one occasion you sent something for my need ([Philippians 4:15-16](javascript:%7b%7d)).

I suspect that most of us assume Paul was supported in the same way that modern missionaries are today. We have already noted that Paul was a “tent-maker missionary,” being supported by his own labors most of the time. One reason for this was that this was Paul’s personal conviction, as seen in [1 Corinthians 9:1-23](javascript:%7b%7d). Another reason seems to be that the sending church (Antioch) did not commit to monthly support, as churches and individuals often do today. Paul says plainly to the Philippians that their giving to him is the exception, rather than the rule. Not only did they send Epaphroditus to minister to Paul in his imprisonment, they also sent funds. In part, this may have been due to the fact that this is the way prisoners were cared for – by contributions from friends and family. But it would seem that on this occasion, the Philippian saints sent money to Paul as an expression of their love and partnership in his ministry:

3 I thank my God every time I remember you. 4 I always pray with joy in my every prayer for all of you 5 because of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now ([Philippians 1:3-5](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Consequently, Paul was able to spend all of his time in preaching the gospel (and no doubt in personally following up with those who came to faith). I suspect that it was a combination of Paul’s intensified ministry and a greater number of converts that precipitated a strong Jewish reaction (verse 6). As he had done before, Paul responded by turning from the Jews to focusing on the Gentiles. He didn’t have far to go, however. He simply moved from the synagogue to the home of Titius Justus, a Gentile believer who lived next door to the synagogue. This must have really irritated the unbelieving Jews, because Paul’s ministry would still impact those attending synagogue.

Among those Jews who believed was a man named Crispus, who was the president of the synagogue. He, along with his entire household, believed in the Lord Jesus and was baptized. Many of the Gentile Corinthians also believed in Jesus, and they were baptized as well.

#### “Don’t Be afraid” [Acts 18:9-11](javascript:%7b%7d)

9 The Lord said to Paul by a vision in the night, “Do not be afraid [*any longer*, NASB], but speak [“go on speaking,” NASB] and do not be silent, 10 because I am with you, and no one will assault you to harm you, because I have many people in this city.” 11 So he stayed there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them ([Acts 18:9-11](javascript:%7b%7d)).

I agree with the translators of the NASB when they render verses 9 and 10 in this way:

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” ([Acts 18:9-10](javascript:%7b%7d), NASB, emphasis mine).

The present imperative, utilized in these two verbs, would suggest that Paul should cease being afraid (thus, he was afraid) and that he should keep on preaching (which he was tempted to cease). Paul was afraid, and he must have been contemplating keeping silent.

Can anyone blame him for feeling this way? Here is a man who has endured more pain at this point in time than any of us will ever experience (and his sufferings are just beginning). His experiences would strongly suggest that he was about to suffer more at the hand of unbelieving Jews (and perhaps some unbelieving Gentiles as well – remember Philippi). Paul seemed to be the “lightning rod” for the opposition. When he came to town, something dramatic usually happened. And when he left, things settled down, even when he left Silas and Timothy behind. Perhaps Paul considered keeping a low profile and toning down the dogmatic way in which he presented Jesus as Israel’s Messiah.

We know that God’s timing is perfect. We also know that God knows our hearts perfectly. Thus, we must assume that if God chose this time to encourage Paul by a night vision, Paul must have needed it, now. We must therefore assume that at this moment in time Paul was afraid of what his opponents might do to him because he proclaimed the gospel. But why would he be afraid now, when he was beginning to experience a good measure of success?

I believe it is precisely because Paul has experienced success that he is afraid. Think of what we have already read in Acts:

4 Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large group of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women. 5 But the Jews became jealous, and gathering together some worthless men from the rabble in the marketplace, they formed a mob and set the city in an uproar. They attacked Jason’s house, trying to find Paul and Silas to bring them out to the assembly ([Acts 17:4-5](javascript:%7b%7d)).

The Jews were provoked to jealousy by the belief of many Gentiles,[3](https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197" \l "P46_19509) and it was this jealousy which prompted their opposition. Paul is now experiencing success in his ministry to the Gentiles; why should he not anticipate intensified opposition from the Jews? It was Paul’s success which posed the danger.

This night vision was just what Paul needed to strengthen and encourage him. Consider what God communicated to Paul through this vision.

*First, God assured Paul that He was with him*. This promise of God’s presence is not just one that is made to Paul. It is a promise to every believer:

18 Then Jesus came up and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. **And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age**” ([Matthew 28:18-20](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

16 Then I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever - 17 the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept, because it does not see him or know him. But you know him, because he resides with you and will be in you. 18 “**I will not abandon you as orphans**, I will come to you” ([John 14:16-18](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

5 Your conduct must be free from the love of money and you must be content with what you have, for he has said, “***I will never leave you and I will never abandon you***.” 6 So we can say with confidence, “***The Lord is my helper****,* ***and******I will not be afraid****.* ***What can man do to me?***” ([Hebrews 13:5-6](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

*Second, God promised Paul that no one would assault him, so as to hurt him.* We know that Paul endured many assaults, along with other forms of suffering:

23 Are they servants of Christ? (I am talking like I am out of my mind!) I am even more so: with much greater labors, with far more imprisonments, with more severe beatings, facing death many times. 24 Five times I received from the Jews forty lashes less one. 25 Three times I was beaten with a rod. Once I received a stoning. Three times I suffered shipwreck. A night and a day I spent adrift in the open sea. 26 I have been on journeys many times, in dangers from rivers, in dangers from robbers, in dangers from my own countrymen, in dangers from Gentiles, in dangers in the city, in dangers in the wilderness, in dangers at sea, in dangers from false brothers, 27 in hard work and toil, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, many times without food, in cold and without enough clothing. 28 Apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxious concern for all the churches. 29 Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not burn with indignation? 30 If I must boast, I will boast about the things that show my weakness. 31 The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is blessed forever, knows I am not lying. 32 In Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to arrest me, 33 but I was let down in a rope-basket through a window in the city wall, and escaped his hands ([2 Corinthians 11:23-33](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Among other things that Paul has suffered thus far in Acts, he has been stoned and left for dead in Lystra ([Acts 14:19](javascript:%7b%7d)). He, along with Silas, has also been beaten severely in Philippi, and then placed in stocks in a prison ([Acts 16:19-23](javascript:%7b%7d)). Had God not intervened, Paul would probably have suffered in Thessalonica, as well as in Berea. Paul has every reason to assume that his success in preaching the gospel to Gentiles in Corinth may result in persecution. We all know that every man’s mind and spirit can be broken if tortured long enough. Paul seems to have reached his limit. And thus God assures him that he will not endure another beating in Corinth.

*Finally, God informed Paul that He had many more souls in Corinth.* God was going to spare Paul any additional torture in Corinth, and He had many souls who were yet to be saved in Corinth. Paul’s ministry was not yet over in Corinth, and thus God assured him that He would protect him from injury in this place. He also assured Paul of even greater success in Corinth. In the strength of these assurances, Paul remained on in Corinth for 18 months. This was the longest stay in any city for Paul up to this point in time.

#### Gallio: An Unexpected and Unwitting Instrument of God [Acts 18:12-17](javascript:%7b%7d)

12 Now while Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews attacked Paul together and brought him before the judgment seat, 13 saying, “This man is persuading people to worship God in a way contrary to the law!” 14 But just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to the Jews, “If it were a matter of some crime or serious piece of villainy, I would have been justified in accepting the complaint of you Jews, 15 but since it concerns points of disagreement about words and names and your own law, settle it yourselves. I will not be a judge of these things!” 16 Then he had them forced away from the judgment seat. 17 So they all seized Sosthenes, the president of the synagogue, and began to beat him in front of the judgment seat. Yet none of these things were of any concern to Gallio ([Acts 18:12-17](javascript:%7b%7d)).

God has promised Paul that He will be with him. He has promised Paul that he will not suffer at the hands of his adversaries in Corinth. He has further assured Paul that He has many more who will yet believe in Corinth. The surprise is not that God fulfills His promises, but how He does so. This we see in [Acts 18:12-17](javascript:%7b%7d).

Before we go on, we must remind ourselves concerning something Luke has already written:

1 After this Paul departed from Athens and went to Corinth. 2 There he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, **because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to depart from Rome** ([Acts 18:1-2](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

Aquila and Priscilla moved to Corinth from Rome because Claudius had expelled all Jews from Rome. Now why would he do such a thing? I am confident that he did so because the Jews were trouble-makers, the very thing Paul’s adversaries accused him of being.

Why do you think Luke bothered to include this detail about Aquila and Priscilla coming from Rome? Let me suggest that it sets the stage for the hearing before Gallio in verses 12-17. Rome has just expelled all Jews for being resistant, rebellious, and subversive.[4](https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197" \l "P63_25903) Their rebellion was so pronounced and widespread that the Roman authority finally rid Rome of all Jews (not just a few trouble-makers). Now, we find the Jews in another Roman city (Corinth) accusing Paul and Silas of virtually the same offense:

“This man is persuading people to worship God in a way contrary to the law!” ([Acts 18:13](javascript:%7b%7d))

In a most clever way, Paul’s Jewish opponents are accusing Paul and Silas of that for which Claudius found all Jews guilty. Even more cleverly, they have accused Paul and Silas of teaching people to worship God in a way that is **“contrary to the law.”** The same word “**law**” here is used both for Roman “law,” and also for the “**law**” of Moses. In truth, their objection is not that Paul incites people to rebel against Rome, because that is exactly what the Jews in Jerusalem wanted Jesus to do. And it was exactly that which Barabbas did. They chose Barabbas rather than Jesus because Jesus would not immediately overthrow Rome. The Jews who accused Paul were hypocritical, at best, not to mention liars. The civil unrest we have seen earlier in Acts is due to Jewish initiative, not due to Paul’s initiative.

Nevertheless, when one reads the accusation these Jews made against Paul and Silas against the backdrop of Claudius’ actions in Rome, there seems to be very little basis for a good verdict from Gallio. If Claudius has already thrown all Jews out of Rome for being revolutionaries, then hearing the same charge against Paul and Silas would surely appear to be sufficient grounds for criminal charges against them. Add to that Gallio’s obvious disregard for justice and compassion (as seen by his apathy while watching the Jews beat Sosthenes in front of him), and one would have little basis for optimism here.

Gallio may not be favorably inclined to Jews, nor filled with the milk of human kindness, nor even predisposed toward justice;[5](https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197" \l "P68_27918) but he is very insightful. No one is going to “pull the wool over his eyes.” Is Gallio going to fall for this false accusation against Paul and Silas? Not for a moment!

Here is what I like best. Gallio will rule in Paul’s favor, and yet without so much as one word being spoken by Paul in his own defense. Let’s admit it; we tend to think of Paul as a brilliant speaker. I’m not so sure that he is as skilled a speaker as we suppose, but let’s save that for another time. If Paul was really a highly skilled speaker, then we might not be surprised if Paul were to speak in his own defense in such a way that it convinced Gallio that he was innocent. But Paul is not allowed to speak. Paul opens his mouth to speak, and Gallio interrupts. Thus, Gallio’s ruling is completely independent, and without any influence on Paul’s part.

So what was his ruling? Consider Gallio’s words:

“If it were a matter of some crime or serious piece of villainy, I would have been justified in accepting the complaint of you Jews, 15 but since it concerns points of disagreement about words and names and your own law, settle it yourselves. I will not be a judge of these things!” 16 Then he had them forced away from the judgment seat ([Acts 18:14](javascript:%7b%7d)b-16).

The crime of which Paul was accused was a most serious offense – a capital offense. He might as well have been accused of treason, for in nature that is very close to sedition. Gallio recognizes the seriousness of the charge, and then promptly dismisses it. They have accused Paul and Silas of sedition. If these charges were true, then Gallio would have taken them seriously. But, in fact, they were not true. This wasn’t really about rebellion against Roman “law” anyway; it was about petty squabbles (in his mind) over the interpretation and application of the “**law**” of Moses. And so Gallio says something like this: “You have accused these men of violating my ‘law,’ but it is really your differences of opinion over violations of your ‘law’ that is at the heart of all this.”

In effect, Gallio throws this case out of court. This is a very significant legal ruling. It is much like our Supreme Court refusing to hear a case that has been brought to it. In so doing, Gallio leaves matters just the way they were. And how was that?

The Roman government had recognized Judaism as the religion of Israel, and thus had given it legal status. As such, Judaism was allowed, and even protected, under Roman law. Other religions were not given the same status. Judaism had been trying to distance itself from Christianity. Judaism sought to officially discredit Christianity and brand it as a heretical (and even revolutionary) religion, contrary not only to Jewish law, but also to Roman law. Gallio recognized that he was being used, and he refused to play into the hands of these Jewish prosecutors. It was all a matter of religious in-fighting within Judaism. He would not pronounce on religious matters. And he was not convinced that Paul and Silas had created any political unrest, unlike their Jewish adversaries. Christianity was Jewish, in the eyes of Rome, and thus Christians would be protected by Rome, especially Christians, like Paul, who were Roman citizens.

I wonder at Gallio’s indifference to the beating of Sosthenes, before his very eyes. But I also note that Sosthenes must have replaced Crispus as the “**president of the synagogue**.”[6](https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197" \l "P76_32518) We know that Crispus became a Christian, along with his whole household. It is reasonable to assume that when Paul and Silas left the synagogue, Crispus either resigned or (perhaps more likely) was fired as “**president of the synagogue**.” How could the synagogue be run by a man who embraced Paul’s preaching?

In my mind’s eye, I can see Crispus going home to his wife one day to announce to her that he had been fired. It was all because of his faith. Can you imagine how Crispus must have felt if he witnessed the “trial” of Paul and Silas before Gallio? I can see him going home that day to tell his wife how his successor was beaten badly for unsuccessfully accusing Paul. Maybe losing his job wasn’t such a bad thing after all.

#### The Second Missionary Journey Ends [Acts 18:18-23](javascript:%7b%7d)

18 Paul, after staying many more days in Corinth, said farewell to the brothers and sailed away to Syria accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. He had his hair cut off at Cenchrea because he had made a vow. 19 When they reached Ephesus, Paul left Priscilla and Aquila behind there, but he himself went into the synagogue and addressed the Jews. 20 When they asked him to stay longer, he would not consent, 21 but said farewell to them and added, “I will come back to you again if God wills.“ Then he set sail from Ephesus, 22 and when he arrived at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church at Jerusalem and then went down to Antioch. 23 After he spent some time there, Paul left and went through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples ([Acts 18:18-23](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Paul stayed on in Corinth for “**many more days**” (verse 18). I take it that he ministered in Corinth for a total of 18 months (see verse 11). He then departed for Syria (Antioch), accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Luke includes a note about Paul cutting his hair off at Cenchrea because he had made a vow. There is a lot of discussion about this “**vow**,” which seems most likely to be a Nazirite vow.[7](https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197" \l "P81_34614) I think Luke tells us about Paul’s vow to inform us that he (and other Jewish believers) are free to observe such Old Testament rituals, knowing that they were a mere “**shadow of what was to come**” (see [Colossians 2:17](javascript:%7b%7d)).

When they reached Ephesus, Paul went to the synagogue, where he addressed the Jews, showing that Jesus was the Christ.[8](https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197" \l "P83_34991) The initial response was similar to what he received elsewhere.[9](https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197" \l "P84_35074) Paul was encouraged to stay longer, so that he could more fully explain his message. Paul did not consent to stay, however. Instead, he promised to return “**if God wills**” ([Acts 18:21](javascript:%7b%7d)). The question that comes to our minds is “Why?” “Why didn’t Paul stay on in Ephesus to preach the gospel to them?”

I can think of several answers. *First*, Paul may be eager to get back to Jerusalem, as he is elsewhere.[10](https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197" \l "P86_35498) This may be related to the vow he had taken (verse 18). *Second*, earlier Paul and Silas had been forbidden to preach the gospel in Asia.[11](https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197" \l "P87_35655) Did this earlier prohibition still stand? Paul may not be certain, and so he waits for further confirmation. He did not wish to attempt to break down a door that God had closed. *Third*, Asia just wasn’t quite ready for Paul. It is clear that Asia is ready by his third missionary journey.[12](https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197" \l "P88_35961) One wonders if Apollos ([Acts 18:24-28](javascript:%7b%7d)) was not part of the preparation process (not to mention Priscilla and Aquila).

Paul set sail from Ephesus, leaving Priscilla and Aquila behind. When his ship had landed at Caesarea, Paul made his way up to Jerusalem. We are not told what Paul did here, but he no doubt would have worshipped in the Temple, and he could have met with some of the saints there, reporting about his second missionary journey. After Jerusalem, Paul went to Antioch, from which he had commenced both of his missionary journeys. Nothing is said of Paul’s ministry in Antioch, except that he spent some time there. When Luke tells us that Paul leaves Antioch and makes his way through “**the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples**,”[13](https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197" \l "P90_36772) he is indicating to us that the second missionary journey has ended and the third missionary journey has begun.

#### The Ministry of Apollos in Ephesus and Corinth [Acts 18:24-28](javascript:%7b%7d)

24 Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, arrived in Ephesus. He was an eloquent speaker, well-versed in the scriptures. 25 He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and with great enthusiasm he spoke and taught accurately the facts about Jesus, although he knew only the baptism of [John. 26](javascript:%7b%7d) He began to speak out fearlessly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the way of God to him more accurately. 27 When Apollos wanted to cross over to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he assisted greatly those who had believed by grace, 28 for he refuted the Jews vigorously in public debate, demonstrating from the scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.

Apollos is a most fascinating fellow. Thanks to Luke’s description of him, we know that he is a very bright and gifted Jew from Alexandria. This Egyptian city had a great impact on Christianity. It was here that the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) was written. The New Testament writers often cited Scripture from the Septuagint. One of the early Greek manuscripts of the New Testament (Codex Alexandrinus), along with other important New Testament manuscripts, was obtained in Alexandria. Alexandrian Jews were among those with whom Stephen debated ([Acts 6:9](javascript:%7b%7d)). If Apollos was “**well-versed in the scriptures**” ([Acts 18:24](javascript:%7b%7d)) it was probably in Alexandria that he became a great student of the Old Testament.

Apollos was not only very knowledgeable in the Old Testament Scriptures; he was also a very powerful speaker. (He almost seems to be a replacement for Stephen, who died as a martyr for the faith – [Acts 6:8](javascript:%7b%7d)—8:1.) Luke tells us a great deal about Apollos, but he also informs us that there were some gaps in his understanding of the gospel. The question is, “What were these gaps?” While students of Scripture differ on this point, I have concluded to my own satisfaction that Apollos was unaware that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. Let me suggest the evidence that pointed me in this direction.

1. We are told that Apollos knew the Old Testament Scriptures well. This was his area of expertise and strength. Through the Old Testament Scriptures, he had been instructed in “**the way of the Lord**” ([Acts 18:24](javascript:%7b%7d)). The term rendered “**Lord**”[14](https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197" \l "P96_39311) here need not refer to Jesus, but can just as easily refer to God the Father. But even if “**Lord**” here refers to Jesus, it would simply mean that Apollos knew many of the facts about Jesus, facts about Him that were revealed by the Old Testament prophets. Apollos knew a lot about the Messiah who was to come, yet without knowing Jesus personally as the Messiah.

2. If this is true (that Apollos had not yet personally come to trust in Jesus as the promised Messiah), it in no way undercuts the importance of Apollos to Luke’s argument. Think of it this way. Paul’s normal method of preaching in the synagogue was to begin by proving from the Old Testament that Messiah must suffer, die, and be raised from the dead. Then Paul went on to show how Jesus fulfilled these Old Testament prophecies. From Luke’s description of Apollos, we can see that Apollos’ message was precisely the same as the first part of Paul’s presentation of the gospel (from the Old Testament Scriptures). The problem with Apollos was that he did not yet know the second half of Paul’s message – he did not yet know that Jesus of Nazareth was the fulfillment of these prophecies about Messiah. Apollos’ message is further confirmation of the gospel as preached by Paul. Independently of each other, both reached the same conclusion: the Messiah must be rejected by His people, crucified, and raised again. And once enlightened by Priscilla and Aquila, the message of Apollos would be precisely that of Paul.

3. Apollos was an Old Testament saint, like those listed in the “hall of faith” in [Hebrews 11](javascript:%7b%7d). He was like the Ethiopian eunuch of [Acts 8](javascript:%7b%7d), or Cornelius of [Acts 10](javascript:%7b%7d). He (like other Old Testament saints) believed that Messiah was coming,[15](https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197" \l "P99_41400) but they did not, as yet, realize that He had come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

4. The story of the further instruction of Apollos by Priscilla and Aquila is placed just before Luke’s account of the 12 brethren in Ephesus who were disciples of John the Baptist, who had never received believers’ baptism or the gift of the Holy Spirit. Whatever Apollos was lacking, it seems to be the same thing the 12 disciples lacked. And since those in the house of Cornelius and the 12 Paul met in Ephesus were clearly saved, then baptized, and finally baptized by the Holy Spirit, we can safely assume (I believe) that this was the case with Apollos as well.

Thus, I don’t see how we can conclude that Apollos had come to trust in Jesus as the promised Messiah until after Priscilla and Aquila informed him more accurately. He knew that Messiah was coming. I believe that he knew Messiah would be rejected by the nation Israel and die for the sins of His people. I believe that Apollos knew that Messiah would be raised from the dead. But what he didn’t know was that Jesus was the fulfillment of Israel’s messianic hopes. Thanks to Priscilla and Aquila, he does now.

Why does Luke bother to include this information about Apollos? As mentioned above, I believe the similarity between the preaching of Paul and that of Apollos was further confirmation of the truth and accuracy of Paul’s gospel. The gospel was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies, and Jesus was the fulfillment of the prophecies of the coming of Messiah. I believe there is another reason why Apollos is included in this account: it enables us to better understand Paul’s references to Apollos in his epistles. Aside from references to Apollos in Acts (18:24; 19:1), we find Paul frequently referring to him in his First Corinthian Epistle (1:12; 3:4, 5, 6, 22; 4:6; 16:12). Beyond this, he is mentioned only one other time ([Titus 3:13](javascript:%7b%7d)). Apollos is noteworthy because of his great gift as a speaker and also because of his independence from Paul:

With regard to our brother Apollos: I strongly encouraged him to visit you with the other brothers, but it was simply not his intention to come now. He will come when he has the opportunity ([1 Corinthians 16:12](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Obviously, Apollos did not take orders from Paul, nor need he do so. Apollos could sense when it was God’s time for him to visit Corinth, where he had been before (see [Acts 18:27-28; 19:1](javascript:%7b%7d)).

I believe there is at least one more reason why Apollos is mentioned in [Acts 18](javascript:%7b%7d) and 19. There is a kind of alternation that takes place in Ephesus and Corinth. Paul spent a good while in Corinth (at least 18 months according to [Acts 18:11](javascript:%7b%7d)), and then he moved on to Ephesus, where he briefly ministered before leaving for Syria ([Acts 18:19-21](javascript:%7b%7d)). Apollos seems to have arrived in Ephesus after Paul had left ([Acts 18:24-26](javascript:%7b%7d)). It was here that Priscilla and Aquila (whom Paul had left behind in Ephesus) more fully explained the way of God to him. From Ephesus, Apollos went on to Corinth in Achaia ([Acts 18:27; 19:1](javascript:%7b%7d)), where he ministered. It is interesting to note Luke’s assessment of Apollos’ ministry:

When Apollos wanted to cross over to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, **he assisted greatly those who had believed by grace** ([Acts 18:27](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

According to Luke, the ministry of Apollos was not evangelism as much as it was edification. He was instrumental in assisting those who had believed. It was Paul who was instrumental in the conversion of the Corinthian saints; it was Apollos who followed up with these new believers, strengthening their faith by his strong affirmation of the gospel as Paul had proclaimed it. This perfectly squares with Paul’s words to the Corinthians:

I planted, Apollos watered, but God caused it to grow ([1 Corinthians 3:6](javascript:%7b%7d)).

After Apollos left Ephesus for Corinth, Paul seems to have arrived for his much more lengthy ministry there ([Acts 19:1](javascript:%7b%7d)ff.). All this alternation between Paul and Apollos shows how God graciously works to save and to sanctify His own people. The spread of the gospel was not the work of just one man – Paul – but was the work of a plurality (a team, if you would) of people, who were used of God in a powerful way.

#### Paul Returns to Ephesus and Finds Faith [Acts 19:1-7](javascript:%7b%7d)

1 While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul went through the inland regions and came to Ephesus. He found some disciples there 2 and said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” They replied, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” 3 So Paul said, “Into what then were you baptized?” “Into John’s baptism,” they replied. 4 Paul said, “John baptized with a baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.” 5 When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, 6 and when Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they began to speak in tongues and to prophesy. 7 (Now there were about twelve men in all.) ([Acts 19:1-7](javascript:%7b%7d))

I will deal with this text briefly here and return to it in our next study. There is good reason not to lose sight of this text when studying [Acts 18](javascript:%7b%7d). Apollos seems to have been very much like these 12 Ephesian “**disciples**.” Apollos and these 12 disciples were products of the ministry of John the Baptist (compare [Acts 18:25](javascript:%7b%7d) and 19:3). Apollos and these 12 men seem to have been Old Testament saints who were looking for the Messiah, who had heard and believed the message of John the Baptist, but who had not yet been informed that Jesus was the Messiah the prophets foretold and about whose coming John the Baptist preached. What Priscilla and Aquila did for Apollos, Paul did for these Ephesian disciples.

When they heard the “rest of the story,” these 12 disciples of John believed in Jesus and were baptized in His name. Then, when Paul placed his hands upon them, they received the gift of the Holy Spirit, just as Luke has recorded concerning Pentecost ([Acts 2:1-4](javascript:%7b%7d)), the Samaritan saints ([Acts 8:14-17](javascript:%7b%7d)), and Cornelius and those who were with him ([Acts 10:44-46](javascript:%7b%7d)). We will deal with this more fully in our next lesson.

### Conclusion

*The first thing we can learn from our text is that Paul is human and that he has his fears and his weaknesses.* If God finds it necessary to speak to Paul in a night vision and to tell him to stop being afraid, then we certainly are justified in concluding that Paul has his weaknesses, like us. James tells us that Elijah was just a man, like us:

Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain and there was no rain on the land for three years and six months! ([James 5:17](javascript:%7b%7d))

Other texts of Scripture indicate how Paul must have felt at this point in time:

5 So when I could bear it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter somehow tempted you and our toil had proven useless. 6 But now Timothy has come to us from you and given us the good news of your faith and love and that you always think of us with affection and long to see us just as we also long to see you! 7 So in all our distress and affliction, we were reassured about you, brothers and sisters, through your faith. 8 For now we are alive again, if you stand firm in the Lord. 9 For how can we thank God enough for you, for all the joy we feel because of you before our God? 10 We pray earnestly night and day to see you in person and make up what may be lacking in your faith ([1 Thessalonians 3:5-10](javascript:%7b%7d)).

For even when we came into Macedonia, our body had no rest at all, but we were troubled in every way - struggles from the outside, fears from within ([2 Corinthians 7:5](javascript:%7b%7d)).

In fact, it was through Paul’s weakness that God glorified Himself:

7 . . . Therefore, so that I would not become arrogant, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to trouble me - so that I would not become arrogant. 8 I asked the Lord three times about this, that it would depart from me. 9 But he said to me, “My grace is enough for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” So then, I will boast most gladly about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may reside in me. 10 Therefore I am content with weaknesses, with insults, with troubles, with persecutions and difficulties for the sake of Christ, for whenever I am weak, then I am strong ([2 Corinthians 12:7-10](javascript:%7b%7d)).

*The**second thing we should learn is that God never intended for us to be “Lone Ranger” Christians; He purposed to use Christians collectively to accomplish His purposes.*When we read about spiritual growth in [Ephesians 4:10-16](javascript:%7b%7d), Paul speaks of growing up together *as a church*, and not just individual growth. In [1 Corinthians 12](javascript:%7b%7d), Paul describes individual Christians as members of the body of our Lord, members of the church. When God set someone apart for missions, He set apart Barnabas and Saul ([Acts 13:1-4](javascript:%7b%7d)), not just Saul (Paul). In our text, we see a number of Christians being used of God, and not just Paul. There is Silas and Timothy ([Acts 18:5](javascript:%7b%7d)), Priscilla and Aquila (18:1-3, 26), and Apollos ([Acts 18:24-28](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Thus, when Paul writes his First Epistle to the Corinthians, he rebukes those who foolishly follow one man:

11 For members of Chloe’s household have made it clear to me, my brothers and sisters, that there are quarrels among you. 12 Now I mean this, that each of you is saying, “I am with Paul,“ or “I am with Apollos,“ or “I am with Cephas,“ or “I am with Christ.“ 13 Is Christ divided? Paul wasn’t crucified for you, was he? Or were you in fact baptized in the name of Paul? ([1 Corinthians 1:11-13](javascript:%7b%7d))

4 For whenever someone says, “I am with Paul,“ or “I am with Apollos,“ are you not merely human? 5 What is Apollos, really? Or what is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, and each of us in the ministry the Lord gave us. 6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God caused it to grow. 7 So neither the one who plants counts for anything, nor the one who waters, but God who causes the growth. 8 The one who plants and the one who waters work as one, but each will receive his reward according to his work ([1 Corinthians 3:4-8](javascript:%7b%7d)).

In a day when Christians are tempted to idolize a particular Christian leader, let us remember Paul and our text.

*Third, God used people to encourage and to strengthen Paul in his hour of weakness.* Paul was alone when he first came to Corinth ([Acts 17:14; 18:5](javascript:%7b%7d)). God first brought Paul to Aquila and Priscilla ([Acts 18:1-3](javascript:%7b%7d)), and then later he was joined by Silas and Timothy (who appear to have come with a gift from the saints at Philippi – see [Acts 18:5](javascript:%7b%7d); [Philippians 4:15-16](javascript:%7b%7d)). Apollos did not have direct contact with Paul in our text, but his ministry did complement Paul’s ministry ([Acts 18:27](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Wonder of wonders, God even used a pagan Roman official like Gallio to encourage Paul. God first encouraged Paul by assuring him that there were many souls in Corinth whom He had chosen for salvation ([Acts 18:9-10](javascript:%7b%7d)). He also assured Paul that he would not be harmed in Corinth, as he had been earlier. Who would have thought that God’s instrument of deliverance would have been Gallio? When charged with insurrection, Paul does not even get the opportunity to speak in his own defense. Instead, he is defended by Gallio. And rather than Paul taking a beating, it appears that the Jewish man who led the opposition (Sosthenes), took a beating instead ([Acts 18:16-17](javascript:%7b%7d)).

James indicated that Elijah was a man “**of like passions**,” a man like us ([James 5:17](javascript:%7b%7d)). I have taught about Elijah before, and I always assumed that Elisha was chosen merely as Elijah’s replacement (lest Elijah think of himself as indispensable). But in studying our text in [Acts 18](javascript:%7b%7d), I have changed my mind about Elisha. Elisha was immediately selected to accompany Elijah, and he remained at his side until he (Elijah) was taken up into heaven ([2 Kings 2:1-11](javascript:%7b%7d)). I now believe that one of Elisha’s primary functions was to provide fellowship and encouragement to Elijah.

Paul, too, was merely a man, like us. But God knows our frame and that we are but dust ([Psalm 103:14](javascript:%7b%7d)), and thus God provided encouragement for Paul in his hour of weakness and fear. He encouraged him by a night vision, as well as by working through others like Aquila and Priscilla, Silas and Timothy, Apollos, and even Gallio. What a gracious God we serve.

*Fourth, Luke provides us with insight into how missionary activity was financed in the early days of the church.*It appears that Paul did not “raise support” in the way it is done today. We know from [1 Corinthians 9](javascript:%7b%7d) that it is not wrong to be supported by those to whom we minister. But Paul set his right to support aside for the good of the gospel. Instead of being supported, Paul supported himself and others by tent-making, by working with his own hands so that he could give to others in need.

Now for many, a tent-making ministry is not possible. A computer programmer would find little work to support himself in the jungles of the Amazon River. Some ministries require support from the church. But not all ministries do. In fact, tent-making ministries may be the only way that some missionaries will ever be able to enter certain countries legally, so that they can proclaim Christ. Let us keep this option open in our minds, because it is a wonderful way to minister in some situations.

Let us also bear in mind that this is not the only way to do ministry. When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, they seem to have come with a financial gift, a gift which enabled Paul to cease his tent-making job and devote himself fully to the proclamation of the Word of God. Let us not look down on this divine provision as well.

*Finally, let us rejoice in the way that God worked through human instruments to bring salvation to those who were desperately lost and destined for eternal judgment.*Let us remember the kind of people God saved in Corinth:

9 Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! The sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, passive homosexual partners, practicing homosexuals, 10 thieves, the greedy, drunkards, the verbally abusive, and swindlers will not inherit the kingdom of God. 11 Some of you once lived this way. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God ([1 Corinthians 6:9-11](javascript:%7b%7d)).

God is still in the business of taking sinful men and making saints of them through the shed blood of His Son, Jesus Christ. And He has given us the privilege of having a part in this marvelous ministry. Let us be about the task, knowing that He will save those He has chosen, and that He will use us in our weakness to do so.

Let us also take note of the fact that God works through His body, the church, and not just through individual effort. God used others to comfort Paul in his time of need, and He used these same people to advance the gospel. Are you lonely? Are you fearful? Do you feel helpless? If you have not trusted in Jesus, do so today. And if you have trusted in Jesus, then get involved in a good church where you can minister with others and to others, and where they can minister to you.

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[2](https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197" \l "P12_5604) Copyright © 2006 by Community Bible Chapel, 418 E. Main Street, Richardson, TX 75081. This is the edited manuscript of Lesson 25 in the *Studies in the Book of Acts* series prepared by Robert L. Deffinbaugh on May 21, 2006. Anyone is at liberty to use this lesson for educational purposes only, with or without credit. The Chapel believes the material presented herein to be true to the teaching of Scripture, and desires to further, not restrict, its potential use as an aid in the study of God’s Word. The publication of this material is a grace ministry of Community Bible Chapel.

[3](https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197" \l "P46_19510) Compare [Romans 11:13-14](javascript:%7b%7d).

[4](https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197" \l "P63_25904) I believe this is precisely why Rome sacked Jerusalem under Titus in 70 A.D. They were finally fed up with Jewish autonomy.

[5](https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197" \l "P68_27919) It is only right that I point out that John R.W. Stott would differ with me here. He speaks much more favorably of Gallio: “He was the younger brother of Seneca, the Stoic philosopher and tutor of the youthful Nero, and Seneca spoke appreciatively of his brother’s tolerant kindness.” John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), p. 299. What would one expect one to say about his younger brother? Luke does not seem to speak of him in the same way. Later, Stott explains Gallio’s indifference to the beating given to Sosthenes before his own eyes: “Luke’s addition that *Gallio showed no concern whatever* (17b) does not mean that he was indifferent to justice, but that he considered it judicious to turn a blind eye to this act of violence” (Stott, p. 300). I am not persuaded by Stott, as much as I respect his scholarship. From Luke’s description, I do not see Gallio as a compassionate man whose only interest is justice. I think God used an unwilling and uncaring Roman official to accomplish His will: “The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD like channels of water; he turns it wherever he wants” ([Proverbs 21:1](javascript:%7b%7d)).

[6](https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197" \l "P76_32519) Compare verse 17, where Sosthenes is called the “**president of the synagogue**,” with verse 8, where Crispus holds this title.

[7](https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197" \l "P81_34615) See [Numbers 6](javascript:%7b%7d); [Judges 13:5-7; 16:17](javascript:%7b%7d).

[8](https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197" \l "P83_34992) See [Acts 17:2](javascript:%7b%7d).

[9](https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197" \l "P84_35075) See [Acts 13:42](javascript:%7b%7d).

[10](https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197" \l "P86_35499) See [Acts 20:16](javascript:%7b%7d).

[11](https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197" \l "P87_35656) [Acts 16:6](javascript:%7b%7d).

[12](https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197" \l "P88_35962) See [Acts 19](javascript:%7b%7d), especially verse 10.

[13](https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197" \l "P90_36773) Verse 23.

[14](https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197" \l "P96_39312) In [Matthew 1:22; 2:15](javascript:%7b%7d) *kurios* is employed in reference to God the Father; in [John 20:18, 28](javascript:%7b%7d) it is used in reference to the Son. This Greek term (*kurios*) that is most often rendered “**Lord**” is used to translate the Hebrew term *adonai*, which was read in place of the sacred tetragrammaton (*Yahweh*). The point is that it can refer either to the Father or to the Son.

[15](https://bible.org/seriespage/25-seeing-paul-perspective-acts-181-197" \l "P99_41401) See [John 8:56](javascript:%7b%7d).

Athens Revisited An Exegetical Study of Acts 17   
by D.A. Carson at [*https://www.monergism.com/athens-revisited-exegetical-study-acts-17-da-carson*](https://www.monergism.com/athens-revisited-exegetical-study-acts-17-da-carson)

**I would like to think that most of us have become convinced of the primacy of what might generically be called worldview evangelism.** In the recent past, at least in North America and Europe, evangelism consisted of a fairly aggressive presentation of one small part of the Bible’s story line. Most non-Christians to whom we presented the gospel shared enough common language and outlook with us that we did not find it necessary to unpack the entire plot line of the Bible.

A mere quarter of a century ago, if we were dealing with an atheist, he or she was not a generic atheist but a Christian atheist-that is, the God he or she did not believe in was more or less a god of discernibly Judeo-Christian provenance. The atheist was not particularly denying the existence of Hindu gods — Krishna, perhaps — but the God of the Bible. But that meant that the categories were still ours. The domain of discourse was ours.

When I was a child, if I had said, “Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,” 80 percent of the kids in my school could have responded, “Hail the incarnate deity.” That was because Christmas carols like “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing” were sung in home, church, school, and street. These kids may not have understood all-the words, but this domain of Christian discourse was still theirs. Young people at university doubtless imbibed massive doses of naturalism, but in most English departments it was still assumed you could not plumb the vast heritage of English poetry if you possessed no knowledge of the language, metaphors, themes, and categories of the Bible.

In those days, then, evangelism presupposed that most unbelievers, whether they were atheists or agnostics or deists or theists, nevertheless knew that the Bible begins with God, that this God is both personal and transcendent, that he made the universe and made it good, and that the Fall introduced sin and attracted the curse. Virtually everyone knew that the Bible has two Testaments. History moves in a straight line. There is a difference between good and evil, right and wrong, truth and error, fact and fiction. They knew that Christians believe there is a heaven to be gained and a hell to be feared. Christmas is bound up with Jesus’ birth; Good Friday and Easter, with Jesus’ death and resurrection. Those were the givens.

So what we pushed in evangelism was the seriousness of sin, the freedom of grace, who Jesus really is, what his death is about, and the urgency of repentance and faith. That was evangelism. Of course, we tilted things in certain ways depending on the people we were addressing; the focus was different when evangelizing in different subcultural settings— in the Bible Belt, for instance, or in an Italian-Catholic section of New York, or in an Ivy League university. But for most of us, evangelism was connected with articulating and pressing home a very small part of the Bible’s plot line.

In many seminaries like Trinity, of course, we recognized that missionaries being trained to communicate the gospel in radically different cultures needed something more. A missionary to Japan or Thailand or north India would have to learn not only another language or two but also another culture. No less important, they would have to begin their evangelism farther back, because many of their hearers would have no knowledge of the Bible at all and would tenaciously hold to some worldview structures that were fundamentally at odds with the Bible. The best schools gave such training to their missionary candidates. But pastors and campus workers were rarely trained along such lines. After all, they were doing nothing more than evangelizing people who shared their own cultural assumptions, or at least people located in the same domain of discourse, weren’t they?

We were naive, of course. We were right, a quarter of a century ago, when we sang, “The times they are a-changin’.” Of course, there were many places in America where you could evangelize churchy people who still retained substantial elements of a Judeo-Christian worldview. There are still places like that today: the over-fifties in the Midwest, parts of the Bible Belt. But in the New England states, in the Pacific Northwest, in universities almost anywhere in the country, in pockets of the population such as media people, and in many parts of the entire Western world, the degree of biblical illiteracy cannot be overestimated. One of my students commented a week ago that he was walking in Chicago with his girlfriend, who had a wooden cross hanging from a chain around her neck. A lad stopped her on the sidewalk and asked why she had a plus sign for a necklace. The people whom we evangelize on university campuses usually do not know that the Bible has two Testaments. As Phillip Jensen says, you have to explain to them the purpose of the big numbers and little numbers. They have never heard of Abraham, David, Solomon, Paul — let alone Haggai or Zechariah. They may have heard of Moses, but only so as to confuse him with Charlton Heston.

But this analysis is still superficial. My point is not so much that these people are ignorant of biblical data (though that is true) as that, having lost touch with the Judeo-Christian heritage that in one form or another (sometimes bowdlerized) long nourished the West, they are not clean slates waiting for us to write on them. They are not empty hard drives waiting for us to download our Christian files onto them. Rather, they have inevitably developed an array of alternative worldviews. They are hard drives full of many other files that collectively constitute various non-Christian frames of reference.

**The implications for evangelism are immense. I shall summarize four.**

***First, the people we wish to evangelize hold some fundamental positions that they are going to have to abandon to become Christians.*** To continue my computer analogy, they retain numerous files that are going to have to be erased or revised, because as presently written, those files are going to clash formidably with Christian files. At one level, of course, that is always so. That is why the gospel demands repentance and faith; indeed, it demands the regenerating, transforming work of the Spirit of God. But the less there is of a common, shared worldview between “evangelizer” and “evangelizee,” between the biblically informed Christian and the biblically illiterate postmodern, the more traumatic the transition, the more decisive the change, the more stuff has to be unlearned.

***Second, under these conditions evangelism means starting farther back.*** The good news of Jesus Christ — who he is and what he accomplished by his death, resurrection, and exaltation — is simply incoherent unless certain structures are already in place. You cannot make heads or tails of the real Jesus unless you have categories for the personal/transcendent God of the Bible; the nature of human beings made in the image of God; the sheer odium of rebellion against him; the curse that our rebellion has attracted; the spiritual, personal, familial, and social effects of our transgression; the nature of salvation; the holiness and wrath and love of God. One cannot make sense of the Bible’s plot line without such basic ingredients; one cannot make sense of the Bible’s portrayal of Jesus without such blocks in place. We cannot possibly agree on the solution that Jesus provides if we cannot agree on the problem he confronts. **That is why our evangelism must be “worldview” evangelism.** I shall flesh out what this means in a few moments.

***Third, not for a moment am I suggesting that worldview evangelism is a restrictively propositional exercise.*** It is certainly not less than propositional; the Bible not only presents us with many propositions, but it insists in some cases that unless one believes those propositions one is lost. The point can easily be confirmed by a close reading of the gospel of John. For all its complementary perspectives, it repeatedly makes statements like “Unless you believe that . . .” One really ought not be forced to choose between propositions and relational faith any more than one should be forced to choose between the left wing of an airplane and the right. At its core, worldview evangelism is as encompassing as the Bible. We are called not only to certain propositional confession but also to loyal faith in Jesus Christ, the truth incarnate; to repentance from dead works to serve the living God; to life transformed by the Holy Spirit, given to us in anticipation of the consummated life to come; to a new community that lives and loves and behaves in joyful and principled submission to the Word of the King, our Maker and Redeemer. This massive worldview touches everything, embraces everything. It can be simply put, for it has a center; it can be endlessly expounded and lived out, for in its scope it has no restrictive perimeter.

***Fourth, the evangelist must find ways into the values, heart, thought patterns — in short, the worldview — of those who are being evangelized but must not let that non-Christian worldview domesticate the biblical message.*** The evangelist must find bridges into the other’s frame of reference, or no communication is possible; the evangelist will remain ghettoized. Nevertheless, faithful worldview evangelism under these circumstances will sooner or later find the evangelist trying to modify or destroy some of the alien worldview an d to present another entire structure of thought and conduct that is unimaginably more glorious, coherent, consistent, and finally true.

All of this, of course, the apostle Paul well understood. In particular, by his own example he teaches us the difference between evangelizing those who largely share your biblical worldview and evangelizing those who are biblically illiterate. In Acts 13:16-41, we read Paul’s evangelistic address in a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch. The setting, a synagogue, ensures that his hearers are Jews, Gentile proselytes to Judaism, and Godfearers — in every case, people thoroughly informed by the Bible (what we would today call the Old Testament). In this context, Paul selectively narrates Old Testament history in order to prove that Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Messiah. He quotes biblical texts, reasons his way through them, and argues that the resurrection of Jesus is the fulfillment of biblical prophecies about the Holy One in David’s line not seeing decay From Jesus’ resurrection, Paul argues back to Jesus’ death and its significance — ultimately, the forgiveness of sins and justification before God (vv. 38-39). Paul ends with a biblical passage warning of fearful judgment against skepticism and unbelief. Here, then, is the apostolic equivalent to evangelism among churchy folk, biblically literate folk-the kind of people who already, at a certain level, know their Bibles.

In Acts 17:16-34, however, one finds the apostle Paul evangelizing intelligent Athenians who are utterly biblically illiterate. Here his approach is remarkably different, and has much to teach us as we attempt to evangelize a new generation of biblical illiterates.

Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babbler wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And they took hold of him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.” Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new. So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him.

Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are indeed his offspring.’ Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” So Paul went out from their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

I have organized the rest of what I have to say under four topics: the realities Paul faces, the priorities he adopts, the framework he establishes, and the nonnegotiable gospel he preaches.

**(1) THE REALITIES PAUL FACES**

Apart from their obvious biblical illiteracy — these Athenian intellectuals had never heard of Moses, never cracked a Bible — three features of this culture are striking.

***First, the Roman Empire was characterized not only by large-scale empirical pluralism but also by government-sponsored religious pluralism.*** The Romans knew that a captive people were more likely to rebel if they could align religion, land, and people. Partly to break up this threefold cord, the Romans insisted on adopting into their own pantheon some of the gods of any newly subjugated people, and they insisted equally strongly that the newly subjugated people adopt some of the Roman gods. In any potential civil war, therefore, it would be quite unclear which side the gods were helping — and this policy of god-swaps strengthened the likelihood of imperial peace. It also meant that religious pluralism was not only endemic to the Empire but was buttressed by the force of law After all, it was a capital offense to desecrate a temple — any temple. But let no temple and no God challenge Washington — I mean Rome.

***Second, like us, Paul was dealing not with people who were biblically illiterate and therefore had no worldview, but with people who vociferously argued for various competing and powerful worldviews.***

Two are mentioned in the text: *Epicurean and Stoic* (v. 18). In the first century, philosophy did not have the fairly esoteric and abstract connotations it has today, connected with minor departments in large universities. It referred to an entire way of life, based on a rigorous and self-consistent intellectual system — close to what we mean by worldview The ideal of Epicurean philosophy, Epicurean worldview, was an undisturbed life — a life of tranquility, untroubled by undue involvement in human affairs.

The gods themselves are composed of atoms so fine they live in calmness in the spaces between the worlds. As the gods are nicely removed from the hurly-burly of life, so human beings should seek the same ideal. But over against this vision, as we shall see, Paul presents a God who is actively involved in this world as its Creator, providential Ruler, Judge, and self-disclosing Savior.

Stoic philosophy thought of god as all-pervasive, more or less in a pantheistic sense, so that the human ideal was to live life in line with what is ultimately real, to conduct life in line with this god/principle of reason, which must rule over emotion and passion. Stoicism, as someone has commented, was “marked by great moral earnestness and a high sense of duty.” Against such a vision, the God that Paul presents, far from being pantheistic, is personal, distinct from the creation, and is our final judge. Instead of focusing on “universal reason tapped into by human reasoning,” Paul contrasts divine will and sovereignty with human dependence and need. In short, there is a massive clash of worldviews.

Of course, there were other Greek and Latin worldviews. There is no mention here of the sophists or of the atheistic philosophical materialists such as Lucretius. What is clear is that Paul here finds himself evangelizing men and women deeply committed to one fundamentally alien worldview or another.

***Third, no less striking is the sneering tone of condescension they display in verse 18: What is this babbler trying to say?*** — this “seed picker,” this little bird fluttering around picking up disconnected scraps of incoherent information, this second-class mind? Others remarked, He seems to be advocating foreign gods. Of course, as it turns out, some of these people become genuinely interested in the gospel. The tenor of condescension is unmistakable, however, when an alien worldview feels secure in its thoughtless majority.

These, then, are the realities Paul faces.

**(2) THE PRIORITIES PAUL ADOPTS**

The most immediate and striking response of the apostle Paul to all that he witnesses in Athens is an intuitively biblical analysis: he is greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols (v. 16). Paul might have been overwhelmed by Athens’ reputation as the Oxford or Cambridge or Harvard of the ancient world (though universities per se did not then exist). He might have admired the architecture, gaping at the Parthenon. But Paul is neither intimidated nor snookered by Athens; he sees the idolatry. How we need Christians in our universities and high places who are neither impressed nor intimidated by reputation and accomplishment if it is nothing more than idolatry!

The apostle sets out, then, to evangelize. He aims at two quite different groups. As usual, he attaches a certain priority to evangelizing Jews and Godfearing Gentiles, the churchy folk, the biblically literate people; he reasons in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks (v. 17a). He has a theological reason for this priority that we cannot examine here, but in any case we must never forget to evangelize such people. Second, he evangelizes the ordinary pagans who have no connection with the Bible: he evangelizes day by day in the market place, targeting anyone who happens to be there, most of whom would have been biblically illiterate (v. 17b). He does not wait for an invitation to the Areopagus. He simply gets on with his evangelism, and the invitation to the Areopagus is the result (v. 18).

***These, then, are his priorities: God-centered cultural analysis, and persistent evangelism of both biblical literates and biblical illiterates.***

Perhaps I should add that there is at least one fundamental difference between Paul’s situation and ours. When Paul evangelizes biblical illiterates, he is dealing with people whose heritage has not in recent centuries had anything to do with biblical religion. ***So when they react negatively to him, they do so solely because, from their perspective, his frame of reference is so alien to their own. They are not rejecting him in part because they are still running away from their own heritage. That is the additional problem we sometimes face. We sometimes deal with men and women who have adopted a worldview that is not only at several points profoundly antithetical to a biblical worldview but also self-consciously chosen over against that biblical worldview.*** That opens up some opportunities for us, but it raises some additional barriers as well. However, we cannot probe these opportunities and barriers here. It is enough to observe the priorities that Paul adopts.

**(3) THE FRAMEWORK PAUL ESTABLISHES**

Here it will be helpful to run through Paul’s argument from 17:22 to 17:31. Before I do so, however, I want to make three preliminary observations.

***First, it takes you about two minutes to read this record of Paul’s address. But speeches before the Areopagus were not known for their brevity. In other words, we must remember that this is a condensed report of a much longer speech.*** Doubtless every sentence, in some cases every clause, constituted a point that Paul expanded upon at length.

***Second, if you want to know a little more closely just how he would have expanded each point, it is easier to discover than some people think***. For there are many points of comparison between these sermon notes and, for instance, Romans. I’ll draw attention to one or two of the parallels as we move on.

***Third, there is a fascinating choice of vocabulary.*** It has often been shown that many of the expressions in this address, especially in the early parts, are the sorts of things one would have found in Stoic circles. Yet in every case, Paul tweaks them so that in his context they convey the peculiar emphases he wants to assign to them. In other words, **the vocabulary is linguistically appropriate to his hearers**, but at the level of the sentence and the paragraph, Paul in this report is saying just what he wants to say; he is establishing a biblical worldview.

Now let us scan the framework Paul establishes.

***First, he establishes that God is the creator of the world and everything in it (17:24).*** How much he enlarged on this point we cannot be certain, but we know from his other writings how his mind ran. The creation establishes that God is other than the created order; pantheism is ruled out. It also establishes human accountability; we owe our Creator everything, and to defy him and set ourselves up as the center of the universe is the heart of all sin. Worse, to cherish and worship created things instead of the Creator is the essence of idolatry.

***Second, Paul insists that God is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands (v. 24).*** The sovereignty of God over the whole universe stands over against views that assign this god or that goddess a particular domain — perhaps the sea (Neptune), or tribal gods with merely regional or ethnic interests. The God of the Bible is sovereign over everything. This teaching grounds the doctrine of providence. Because of the universality of his reign, God cannot be domesticated — not even by temples (v. 24). Paul is not denying the historical importance of the temple in

Jerusalem, still less that God uniquely disclosed himself there. Rather, he denies that God is limited to temples, and that he can be domesticated or squeezed or tapped into by the cultus of any temple (which of course threatens popular pagan practice). He is so much bigger than that.

***Third, God is the God of aseity: he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything (17:25).*** Aseity is a word now largely fallen into disuse, though it was common in Puritan times. Etymologically it comes from the Latin *a se* — “from himself.” *God is so utterly “from himself” that he does not need us; he is not only self-existent (a term we often deploy with respect to God’s origins — the existence of everything else is God-dependent, but God himself is self-existent), but he is utterly independent of his created order so far as his own well-being or contentment or existence are concerned.* God does not need us — a very different perspective from that of polytheism, where human beings and gods interact in all kinds of ways bound up with the finiteness and needs of the gods. The God of the Bible would not come to us if, rather whimsically, he wanted a McDonald’s hamburger; the cattle on a thousand hills are already his.

***Fourth, the truth of the matter is the converse: we are utterly dependent on him — he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else (v. 25b).*** This strips us of our vaunted independence; it is the human correlative of the doctrines of creation and providence.

***Fifth, from theology proper, Paul turns to anthropology. He insists that all nations descended from one man (v. 26).*** This contradicts not a few ancient notions of human descent, which conjectured that different ethnic groups came into being in quite different ways. But Paul has a universal gospel that is based on a universal problem (cf. Rom. 5; 1 Cor. 15). If sin and death were introduced into the one human race by one man such that the decisive act of another man is required to reverse them, then it is important for Paul to get the anthropology right so that the soteriology is right. We cannot agree on the solution if we cannot agree on the problem. But Paul’s stance has yet wider implications; there is no trace of racism here. Moreover, however much he holds that God has enjoyed a peculiar covenant relationship with Israel, because he is a monotheist, Paul holds that God must be sovereign over all the nations. Did he, perhaps, develop some of the lines of argument one finds in Isaiah 40ff.? If there is but one God, that God must in some sense be the God of all, whether his being and status are recognized by all or not.

***Sixth, for the first time one finds an explicit reference to something wrong in this universe that God created. His providential rule over all was with the purpose that some would reach out for him and find him (v. 27).*** In short order Paul will say much more about sin (without actually using the word). Here he is preparing the way. The assumption is that the race as a whole does not know the God who made them. Something has gone profoundly wrong.

***Seventh, although it has been important for him to establish God’s transcendence, Paul does not want such an emphasis to drift toward what would later be called deism. The God he has in mind is not far from each one of us (v. 27). He is immanent.*** Paul will not allow any suspicion that God is careless or indifferent about people; he is never far from us. Moreover, the apostle recognizes that some of this truth is acknowledged in some pagan religions. When Greek thought (or much of it) spoke of one “God” as opposed to many gods, very often the assumption was more or less pantheistic. That structure of thought Paul has already ruled out. Still, some of its emphases were not wrong if put within a better framework. We live and move and have our being in this God, and we are his offspring (17:28) — not, for Paul, in some pantheistic sense, but as an expression of God’s personal and immediate concern for our well-being.

***Eighth, the entailment of this theology and this anthropology is to clarify what sin is and to make idolatry utterly reprehensible (v. 29).*** Doubtless Paul enlarged this point very much in terms of, say, Isaiah 44-45 and Romans 1. For he cannot rightly introduce Jesus and his role as Savior until he establishes what the problem is; he cannot make the good news clear until he elucidates the bad news from which the good news rescues us.

***Ninth, Paul also introduces what might be called a philosophy of history — or better, perhaps, a certain view of time.*** Many Greeks in the ancient world thought that time went round and round in circles. Paul establishes a linear framework: creation at a fixed point; a long period that is past with respect to Paul’s present in which God acted in a certain way (In the past God over-looked such ignorance); a now that is pregnant with massive changes; and a future (v. 31) that is the final termination of this world order, a time of final judgment. The massive changes of Paul’s dramatic now are bound up with the coming of Jesus and the dawning of the gospel. Paul has set the stage so as to introduce Jesus.

So here is the framework Paul establishes. He has, in fact, constructed a biblical worldview. But he has not done so simply for the pleasure of creating a worldview. In this context he has done so in order to provide a framework in which Jesus himself, not least his death and resurrection, makes sense. Otherwise nothing that Paul wants to say about Jesus will make sense.

This is the framework Paul establishes.

**(4) THE NONNEGOTIABLE GOSPEL PAUL PREACHES**

We read again verse 31: For [God] has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.

Here, at last, Jesus is introduced.

I want to emphasize two things. ***First, it is extraordinarily important to see that Paul has established the framework of the biblical metanarrative before he introduces Jesus.*** If metaphysics is a sort of big physics that explains all the other branches of physics, similarly metanarrative is the big story that explains all the other stories. By and large, postmodernists love stories, especially ambiguous or symbol-laden narratives. But they hate the metanarrative, the big story that makes all the little stories coherent. But what Paul provides is the biblical metanarrative. This is the big story in the Bible that frames and explains all the little stories. Without this big story, the accounts of Jesus will not make any sense — and Paul knows it.

For instance, if in a vague, New Age, postmodern context, we affirm something like “God loves you,” this short expression may carry a very different set of associations than we who are Christians might think. We already assume that men and women are guilty and that the clearest and deepest expression of God’s love is in the cross, where God’s own Son dealt with our sin at the expense of his own life. But if people know nothing of this story line, then the same words, “God loves you,” may be an adequate summary of the stance adopted by Jodie Foster in her recent film, *Contact*. The alien power is beneficent, wise, good, and interested in our well-being. There is nothing whatever to do with moral accountability, sin, guilt, and how God takes action to remove our sin by the death of his Son. The one vision nestles into the framework of biblical Christianity; the other nestles comfortably into the worldview of New Age optimism. ***In short, without the big story, without the metanarrative, the little story or the little expression becomes either incoherent or positively misleading.*** Paul understands the point.

***Second, what is striking is that Paul does not flinch from affirming the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.*** And that is what causes so much offense that Paul is cut off, and the Areopagus address comes to an end. Paul was thoroughly aware, of course, that most Greeks adopted some form of dualism. Matter is bad, or at least relatively bad; spirit is good. To imagine someone coming back from the dead in bodily form was not saying anything desirable, still less believable. Bodily resurrection from the dead was irrational; it was an oxymoron, like intelligent slug or boiled ice. So some of Paul’s hearers have had enough, and they openly sneer and end the meeting (v. 32). If Paul had spoken instead of Jesus’ immortality, his eternal spiritual longevity quite apart from any body, he would have caused no umbrage. But Paul does not flinch. Elsewhere he argues that if Christ has not been raised from the dead, then the apostles are liars, and we are still dead in our trespasses and sins (I Cor. 15). He remains faithful to that vision here. Paul does not trim the gospel to make it acceptable to the worldview of his listeners.

For Paul, then, there is some irreducible and nonnegotiable content to the gospel, content that must not be abandoned, no matter how unacceptable it is to some other worldview. It follows that especially when we are trying hard to connect wisely with some worldview other than our own, we must give no less careful attention to the nonnegotiables of the gospel, lest in our efforts to communicate wisely and with relevance, we unwittingly sacrifice what we mean to communicate.

But suddenly we overhear the muttered objection of the critic. Can it not be argued that Paul here makes a fundamental mistake? Elsewhere in Acts he frequently preaches with much greater fruitfulness, and in those cases he does not stoop to all this worldview stuff. He just preaches Jesus and his cross and resurrection, and men and women get converted. Here, a piddling number believe (v. 34). In fact, Paul’s next stop in Greece after Athens is Corinth. Reflecting later on his experiences there, Paul writes to the Corinthians and reminds them For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified (I Cor. 2:2) — doubtless because he was reflecting with some sour-faced chagrin on his flawed approach in Athens. So let us be frank, the critics charge, and admit that Paul made a huge mistake in Athens and stop holding up Acts 17 as if it were a model of anything except what not to do. The man goofed: he appealed to natural theology; he tried to construct redemptive history; he attempted to form a worldview when he should have stuck to his last and preached Jesus and the cross.

I sometimes wish this reading were correct, but it is profoundly mistaken for a number of reasons.

***(1) It is not the natural reading of Acts.*** As Luke works through his book, he does not at this point in his narrative send up a red flag and warn us that at this point Paul makes a ghastly mistake. The false reading is utterly dependent on taking I Corinthians in a certain way (a mistaken way, as we shall see), and then reading it into Acts 17.

***(2) What Paul expresses, according to Luke’s report of the Areopagus address, is very much in line with Paul’s own theology, not least his theology in the opening chapters of Romans.***

***(3) Strictly speaking, Paul does not say that only a “few” men believed.*** He says *tines de andres*, “certain people,” along with *heteroi*, “others.” These are in line with other descriptions. The numbers could scarcely have been large, because the numbers in the Areopagus could not have been very large in the first place.

***(4) Transparently, Paul was cut off when he got to the resurrection of Jesus (vv. 31-32).*** But judging from all we know of him — both from a book like Romans and from the descriptions of him in Acts — we know where he would have gone from here.

***(5) That is entirely in line with the fact that what Paul had already been preaching in the marketplace to the biblically illiterate pagans was the cc gospel” (v. 18).***

***(6) At this point in his life Paul was not a rookie. Far from being fresh out of seminary and still trying to establish the precise pattern of his ministry, on any chronology he had already been through twenty years of thrilling and brutal ministry.*** Nor is this Paul’s first time among biblically illiterate pagans or among intellectuals.

***(7) In any case, I Corinthians 2 does not cast Paul’s resolve to preach Christ crucified against the background of what had happened to him in Athens.*** He does not say, in effect, “Owing to my serious mistakes in Athens, when I arrived in Corinth I resolved to preach only Christ and him crucified.” Rather, in 1 Corinthians Paul’s resolve to preach Christ crucified is cast against the background of what Christians in Corinth were attracted to — namely, to a form of triumphalism that espoused an ostensible wisdom that Paul detests. It is a wisdom full of pride and rhetoric and showmanship. Against this background, Paul takes a very different course. Knowing that believers must boast only in the Lord and follow quite a different wisdom (I Cor. 1), he resolves to preach Christ and him crucified.

***(8) In any case, it would be wrong to think that Paul has no interest in worldviews.*** Writing after I Corinthians 2, Paul can say, We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ (2 Cor. 10:45). The context shows that Paul is not here interested so much in disciplining the individual’s private thought life (though that certainly concerns him elsewhere) as in bringing into obedience to Christ every thought structure, every worldview, that presents opposition to his beloved Master. In other words, Paul thought “worldviewishly” (if that is not too monstrous a neologism). That is clear in many of his writings; it is clear in both 2 Corinthians 10 and in Acts 17.

***(9) Finally, the first line of Acts 17:34 is sometimes misconstrued: “A few men became followers of Paul and believed.”*** Many have assumed Luke means that a few people became Christians on the spot and followers of Paul. But that reverses what is said. Moreover, Paul has not yet given much gospel — in precisely what sense would they have become Christians? It is better to follow the text exactly Following Paul’s address, no one became a Christian on the spot. But some did become followers of Paul. In consequence, in due course they grasped the gospel and believed; they became Christians. This is entirely in line with the experience of many evangelists working in a university environment today.

A couple of years ago I spoke evangelistically at a large meeting in Oxford. So far as I know, no one became a Christian at that meeting. But sixteen students signed up for a six-week “Discovering Christianity” Bible study. A few weeks after the meeting, the curate, Vaughan Roberts, wrote me a note to tell me that eleven of the sixteen had clearly become Christians already, and he was praying for the remaining five. In other words, as a result of that meeting, some became “followers of Jesus,” and in due course believed. That is often the pattern when part of the evangelistic strategy is to establish a worldview, a frame of reference, to make the meaning of Jesus and the gospel unmistakably plain.

***In short, however sensitive Paul is to the needs and outlook of the people he is evangelizing, and however flexible he is in shaping the gospel to address them directly, we must see that there remains for him irreducible content to the gospel. That content is nonnegotiable, even if it is remarkably offensive to our hearers.*** If it is offensive, we may have to decide whether it is offensive because of the intrinsic message or because we have still not done an adequate job of establishing the frame of reference in which it alone makes sense. But the gospel itself must never be compromised.

**SOME CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS**

I offer three concluding reflections. ***First, the challenge of worldview evangelism is not to make simple things complicated but to make clear to others some fairly complicated things that we simply assume.*** This can be done in fifteen minutes with the sort of presentation Phillip Jensen and Tony Payne have constructed (in Chapter 6 of Telling the Truth – “Two Ways To Live”). It might be done in seven consecutive expositions running right through the first eight chapters of Romans. It might be done with the six months of Bible teaching, beginning with Genesis, that many New Tribes Mission personnel now use before they get to Jesus. But it must be done.

***Second, the challenge of worldview evangelism is not primarily to think in philosophical categories, but it is to make it clear that closing with Jesus has content (it is connected with a real, historical Jesus about whom certain things must be said and believed) and is all-embracing (it affects conduct, relationships, values, priorities).*** It is not reducible to a preferential religious option among many, designed primarily to make me feel good about myself.

***Third, the challenge of worldview evangelism is not primarily a matter of how to get back into the discussion with biblically illiterate people whose perspectives may be very dissimilar to our own. Rather, worldview evangelism focuses primarily on where the discussion goes.*** There are many ways of getting into discussion; the crucial question is whether the Christian witness has a clear, relatively simple, straightforward grasp of what the Bible’s story line is, how it must give form to a worldview, and how the wonderful news of the gospel fits powerfully into this true story — all told in such a way that men and women can see its relevance, power, truthfulness, and life-changing capacity.

\*”*Athens Revisited*”from a conference on the topic of *Evangelism in a Post Modern Culture* held on May 13-15, 1998 at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois & sponsored by the Bannockburn Institute (www.biccc.org). All the lectures from this conference were published in the book: [***Telling The Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns***](https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B003G4W4BK?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creativeASIN=B003G4W4BK&linkCode=xm2&tag=thethreshold-20), Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000;