

Shake Out and Shake Up

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Life of Paul series

Acts 18:1-18a

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Beloved Church,

Living in the city is great! When I lived in a small town, that had its limits. We were constantly driving into the city for one thing or another. In the city there are options for entertainment, for sports, for everything, even for churches.

Picture 1

In Acts 18, we are introduced to Corinth. It was a large and significant city. When the Roman Empire gained control of it, they made it the provincial capital city of Greece. That compares to Edmonton which is the capital city of the province of Alberta in Canada.

As a capital city, Corinth had it all, including different roads to prosperity than small towns. Corinth was a center of trade north and south as well as east and west. It had a main highway and a great seaport. These brought lots of money into the city. Trade also brought lots of different people in and out so what was seen and heard in Corinth could easily spread from there as people came and then returned home. That helps us understand how this made Corinth an excellent missionary post for Paul—the message shared in the city would go back to the small towns and even other countries.

Sports-wise, Corinth gained popularity for a smaller version of the Olympics, something comparable to our Commonwealth Games. It was held every two years, again bringing lots of tourist and their money as well as adding infrastructure and venues to host such events which just added to the appeal of the city.

Along with economics and sports, Corinth had a lot of religions, much like Athens in the previous chapter.

Picture 2

If you look at the pie chart on the screen that shows the religious affiliation of people in Edmonton in 2011, you see that the biggest section in the red still considers themselves Christian. 2/3 seems high but then there are slivers of Aboriginal spirituality, Hinduism, Buddhism, Muslims, Jews and more. The other large chunk—almost a third—claims to be irreligious.

If you did a survey in 50 AD Corinth, you would find that no one would claim to be irreligious, to have no faith. Everyone believed in some sort of god. Most believed in many gods. Polytheism—lots of gods—was a hallmark of ancient Rome and people said that Corinth was more Roman than Rome itself.

Beliefs Shape Actions

However, beliefs shape actions. So in Corinth, religion went hand in hand with immorality, particularly with respect to fertility gods and their followers.

Picture 3

As John Stott reports, “Behind the city, nearly 2,000 feet above sea level, rose the rocky eminence called the Acrocorinth. On its flat summit stood the temple of Aphrodite or Venus, the goddess of love. A thousand female slaves served her and roamed the city’s streets by night as prostitutes.”

Mix in all the business travelers and the sailors in the port city and you have a steady stream of people looking for prostitutes—some for reasons of connecting with the gods through immoral actions and others for mere physical pleasure.

You might find it interesting to know that Corinth was identified with immorality to such a large degree that people used Corinth as a verb. To *Corinthianize* meant to engage in immorality. And the noun *korinthiastēs* was a synonym for a prostitute. This may help explain why a big part of Paul’s letters to this city calls people to reliance on Christ crucified and summons followers to repentance and holiness, while warning them that those who continued to pursue sexual immorality would not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9f).

Can you imagine having the name of our city being synonymous with something like immorality? What would it mean today to Edmontonize? 😊 Well, people might equate Edmonton with oil. We aren’t only called the capital city; we are also called Oil City. We have sports teams that herald our connection to oil, like the Oilers and the Oil Kings. People could equate oil with Edmonton.

Did you hear about the visitor from the Netherlands who came to visit here? For those who don’t know, a Dutchman calls oil “olie” from which they get words like *oliebollen*, oil balls, their deep-fried fritters or sugar-covered donuts which are a common New Year’s treat. Now, this Dutch visitor I mentioned was pretty impressed by Edmonton and our oil city. But then he went to church and was shocked. He went home and reported to his pastor, “Those people are so obsessed with oil that in church they sing, ‘Olie, olie, olie’ (to the tune of *Holy, Holy, Holy*).

That’s a joke, of course. But it could describe how some people in Alberta might almost worship oil as the saviour of our province and our only means of economic success. Corinth, very seriously, was associated with immorality that had its roots in business but even more so in the religion of Aphrodite or Venus.

You see, what we believe effects how we live.

Young people, the gods of our day are mixed into education, often without people even realizing it or acknowledging it. Our city is known for education. We have universities, colleges, trade schools and, of course, many K-12 options. Our society

frowns on teaching religion in the classroom. But every single person is a religious being. Teachers and students alike. Even the atheist's belief that there is no god is a faith stance. This belief guides the atheist in their view of life: the value of life, the afterlife and how we live our life each day. Our actions reflect whether believe we are accountable to a higher truth or think we make our own truth. Our faith intersects with every part of life.

So, if a teacher is something extreme like a Nazi, that's a belief that will affect their view of certain people. All the science can prove that all nationalities are the same on a bio-chemical level. But a Nazi chooses to believe that certain people are better than others, based on skin colour or certain DNA. That belief—as we found in World War 2—affected how certain people—the Jews in particular—were treated and mistreated by the Nazis. They were classified as less than human and deemed worthless. Similarly, people with disabilities were often classified as less than human and put to death. This is part of the reason our soldiers fight in wars—to push back bad actions that have come from bad beliefs. Everyone believes something that guides their life.

That was very much the case in Corinth and it's no different today. The Corinthians engaged in immoral behaviour to win the favour of the gods in order to win a war, succeed in business, have a safe journey or bring in a good crop. Our beliefs shape our actions and Corinthian society was shaped by the belief in gods who needed to be appeased through acts of immorality. That meant prostitutes were necessary which led to the mistreatment of women and children. Bad beliefs can lead to bad treatment of other humans.

This is why Paul always starts with pointing people to Jesus and then moves to show people like the Corinthians that faith in Jesus needs to change our view of how we treat others. That's why sexual immorality is repeatedly denounced by Paul. He doesn't want Christians misusing and abusing other humans, whether for personal satisfaction or to appease a false god.

God's Defense of the Gospel

Such is the reality in Corinth that Paul was up against. Paul is—as I mentioned last time—turning the world of his day upside down while in reality he's trying to help people see that living without Jesus means we are living in our sin and living an upside down life. Jesus turns the world right side up. But that's not an easy sell no matter where you are bringing the gospel. The Bible says things like "People love the darkness more than the light." That's because it's all they know. People often fear what they don't know. Paul faced opposition, including persecution, for preaching the gospel because it sounded so different from what people were used to.

What I want us to see from Acts 18 now is that God opens doors and opens heart to the gospel. If you've been following along in this sermon series on Paul's life, then you might recall that, up to now, Paul hasn't stayed anywhere very long. He preaches for maybe a few weeks in a new city but then opposition grows, he gets threatened or even beaten and thrown in jail. So sooner or later he has to flee for his life. There are people following him because they hate Jesus. Probably more than just hating Jesus,

they are threatened by the gospel and its implications for their life. So Paul ends us being persecuted wherever he goes.

Now, I want you to notice that that stops here in Corinth, which is rather shocking. It stops for a time at least. This points to God's care for Paul and his plan to spread the gospel so that people all over the world can hear about Jesus, believe and be saved. God has appointed Paul to be one of his main mouthpieces.

Very quickly, I invite you to look in your Bible and notice four or five things that are happening. All of these things show how God is providing for Paul so that the gospel can advance. God is defending and promoting the advancement of the gospel.

First of all, God brings two new people into Paul's life. A couple named Aquila and Pricilla. They've been "moved" by the Lord to Corinth because of persecution in Rome. Now they go into the tentmaking business with Paul or he works for them. Paul works for them during the week and preaches on the weekends. That gets the gospel more deeply rooted in Corinth. Aquila and Pricilla become big supporters of Paul because they are strong believers in Jesus Christ.

Secondly, Timothy and Silas catch up with Paul. We aren't given a timeline here. It probably was a few months after Aquila and Pricilla had come, maybe longer. In any event, they come to Corinth and bring a bag of money, it seems, from the Christians in Macedonia. The church there was obviously filled with recent converts to Christianity. They know what a difference Jesus has made in their lives. They are so grateful for God's goodness and saving grace to them that they give money to Paul so that he can keep sharing the gospel with others. This frees Paul up from his tentmaking day-job so that he can now make preaching his day-job. And this, along with having a steady place to live with Aquila and Pricilla, allows Paul to stay in Corinth for longer than he's been anywhere else up to now. He not only plants the Corinthian Church, he now can help disciple it with biblical teaching while also continuing his missionary work.

The thirdly was the God defends the gospel is through Paul's big win. V.8 says, *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.*

This sounds like a jackpot for the gospel. Paul shares the gospel and the ruler of the Jewish synagogue converts. He was convinced that Jesus is the fulfillment of all Old Testament promises. But not only him, many other people in Corinth also believe in Jesus and are baptized. God is advancing the gospel!

Fourthly, God stops a big source of the opposition to the gospel in Corinth and—by extension—in the whole Roman Empire. In v.6 we read about Jewish opposition again. Probably some of the same people who have been following Paul from place to place to stir up trouble for him, as we've seen in Acts 16 and 17.

Because of this opposition, we read that Paul leaves the synagogue. He sets up shop next door at the home of a Greek convert, Titius Justus. We read that Paul shakes out the dust from his clothes—symbolically—outside of the synagogue and quotes Ezekiel saying,

Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.

Paul has not just moved next door. He has moved the focus on his missionary work to the Gentiles now. He's not giving up on the Jews; he's been saying for a long time already that God is calling him to the Gentiles but now that conviction is strengthened as God closes the Jewish door on him.

I said this fourth point is that God stopped the opposition to the gospel. We see in v.14 that the Jews try to stop Paul here as they did elsewhere by getting the Roman leadership to declare the gospel to be contrary to Roman law. That has been somewhat successful till now but here in Corinth as the charges are leveled against Paul in v.14, he's about to defend himself before Gallio. But to Paul's complete surprise, Gallio the Roman ruler of that region comes to Paul's defense. He basically says, "You Jews don't have a case. Paul is preaching about your God too so this is just an inhouse dispute. I'm not going to rule on this." And when he said that, he shook up the Jews. His proclamation meant that Christianity was now recognized as a legal religion in the Roman Empire! What a surprise and what a blessing for Paul and his fellow believers. What a shake up!

And all of this, fifthly, comes just as God promised Paul. We read in vv.9&10 that the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision to encourage him.

"... I am with you. No one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city."

God came to the defense of the gospel so it would advance, so that more people could come to know the love of Christ and his saving work for us.

All these events give Paul the courage and the freedom to stay in Corinth. And from there he preaches the gospel day after day and all those who live in Corinth as well as the many traveler coming and going, hear the message. As a result, the gospel takes root and takes wing to various parts of the Roman Empire.

So, Paul shook out the dust from his clothes. God closed a door. But just down the street, God literally opens another door and the gospel shook up Corinth and much of the Roman world. That's what's amazing about God's grace. He moves in mysterious ways but he is never without a plan and purpose in our lives. When we hit a wall, God says almost like a coach, "Shake it off. Shake out the dust. Move on because I have a plan to shake up the whole world. Everyone needs to know the good news of my saving grace through Jesus. I'm with you. Go now!"

Our Response

We can take that promise with us today too. So how does that make you feel? God is on the move and we are invited in various ways to join in the mission. We live in Edmonton where a large part of our neighbours live without Christ; they need Jesus and the gospel.

I, for one, feel encouraged by how I see the Lord working through Paul, taking care of details, preparing hearts for the gospel, removing barriers and the like. I'm also encouraged because I know that I'm not the Apostle Paul type. I wouldn't be good at sitting among the philosophers in Athens or Corinth doing apologetics. But I would be great as a Silas or Timothy helping Paul out, perhaps doing some pastoring and disciplining in the establish churches.

How about you? Maybe you're like Aquila or Priscilla who played a big role in supporting ministry from their workplace. They may have shared the love of Christ with people they met in the marketplace and where they earned their money to support Paul and the church. Likewise, their home was likely the gathering place for the church and they played an active role. The point is that we all can do our part—young and old, up front, behind the scenes, wealthy or not; whoever we are, we have some God-given gifts to share with the Lord out of gratitude for his saving grace to us in Christ and his faithfulness to us in all circumstances. Paul has a role to play but so do Aquila and Pricilla, Timothy and Silas and all the new converts. We all can play our part in God's mission.

So, look at where you live, where you work, the people you interact with. As you pray, ask the Lord what he has in mind for you. Ask him to show you what he has in store for you. How he wants to use you. A lot of you work in rough places. You know how much people need the gospel, need Jesus. You see their addictions to immorality and the gods that lead them to that. Some of you work in very pleasant places, but maybe with lots of stress and maybe the god of success that drives them. You know what people need where you are. Some of you are in college and university or other schools; you hear lots of different ideas that have implications for life. You are confronted by relativism—no truth is absolute. And atheism—there is no God who created the world and everything in it, no God who gives order to our world and to our lives. Do your best to weigh what is taught and evaluate it in light of the Bible. You can discuss these ideas with others and share your hope in Christ. And, all of us, in this season of covid19, know lots of people who need the reassurance you can show and share that the Lord has us in his care. We are comforted in belonging to him.

Friends, let your actions open doors to the gospel and to the love of Christ. Share his love in words where you can; practice your testimony so it becomes natural—it's just saying to others what Jesus means to you. Support the mission of the Lord in our city and world in the ways the Lord puts on your heart.

There's no promise in this chapter of how the Lord will use us. The promise we hear him giving Paul is that he's with us. He's behind the scenes. He's preparing hearts. He's opening doors and sometimes closing them. He's removing obstacles or using them in ways we aren't fully aware of yet. He's way ahead of us. So, let us trust him to use us—despite our weaknesses and doubts—to help advance the gospel—the Good News of Jesus and his saving grace for the world.

Acts 18 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 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 Messiah. ⁶ But when they 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 innocent of it. 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 leader, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptized.

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 in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.

¹² While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews of Corinth made a united attack on Paul and brought him to the place of judgment. ¹³ "This man," they charged, "is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law."

¹⁴ Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to them, "If you Jews were making a complaint about some misdemeanor or serious crime, it would be reasonable for me to listen to you. ¹⁵ But since it involves questions about words and names and your own law—settle the matter yourselves. I will not be a judge of such things." ¹⁶ So he drove them off. ¹⁷ Then the crowd there turned on Sosthenes the synagogue leader and beat him in front of the proconsul; and Gallio showed no concern whatever.

¹⁸ Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sisters and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila.