

Urban Evangelism and Mixed Reception in Corinth

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Date: 01 August 2021

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. A reading from the Acts of the Apostles.

This is Acts chapter 18, verse 1. After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. 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, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. Every Sabbath, he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.

When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. 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.

[1 : 15] I am innocent of it. From now on, I will go to the Gentiles. Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justice, a worshiper of God.

Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believed in the Lord, and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptized. One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision, Do not be afraid.

Keep on speaking. Do not be silent. For I am with you. And no one is going to attack you and harm you. Because I have many people in this city. So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.

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

Just as Paul was about to speak, Galio 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.

[2 : 22] But since it involves questions about words and names and your own law, settle the matter yourselves. I will not judge of such things. So he drove them off. Then the crowd there turned on Sosthenes, the synagogue leader, and beat him in front of the proconsul.

And Galio showed no concern whatever. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Will you join me in prayer? Christchurch, you can take your seats. Lord, we want to hear from you.

We want to see your vision for the church that you would have us be. Christchurch East Bay. A church that is adoring you in worship. A church that is fellowshiping together in deep and intimate community.

And a church that is outward facing, seeking to serve this city, seeking to bear witness to the good news of Jesus Christ, the Lamb who was slain for the sins of the world, and has risen for resurrection life, to bring about new creation in this world, this new creation that we so, so long for. Make us that kind of a church that lives up, in, and out before you, we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen. Well, Christchurch, we are continuing our series in the book of Acts, all right?

[3 : 31] And as we've been going through this series in the book of Acts, we've been doing so very sensitive to, you know, all the disruption that our church has faced in the past two years.

So going through Acts, we've been really trying to cast a vision for, you know, an aspiring and encouraging, exciting vision for what the Spirit wants to do amongst faithful witnesses of Christ. But even as this book of Acts is meant to inspire us and encourage us, it's important to remember that it's also a realistic account. It's realistic about the pain and the hardship and the grind of being

the church, of being Christ's witnesses to the ends of the earth.

And I think this is especially evident here in Acts chapter 18 and Paul's experience in Corinth. It wasn't all rainbows and butterflies. The movement was often slow and painful and discouraging and met with opposition and filled with disruption.

And yet, God was no less in control. The Spirit was no less at work. And this means that we, the church, are no less called, no less challenged, no less responsible to go about the work of bearing witness to Christ, even if it is slow and even if it is painful.

[4 : 46] So from Acts chapter 18 this morning, I want us to see how the Spirit unites a disparate community of weary witnesses, even in and through their disruptions, and how the Spirit gathers them into a growing family of sacrificial service.

And my prayer is that God, the Spirit, does the same here at Christ Church, all right? So let's start with verse 1. Look with me at verse 1. In verse 1, we're reminded that the very occasion for Paul's presence in Corinth is because Paul was chased out of three other cities.

And then in Athens, a city that really would have been an incredible place to win for Jesus, very little response there. But look what God does out of Paul's disruptions, out of Paul's disappointments. He starts to gather a family of witnesses in Corinth as a result of the disruptions in Paul's life. And not only as a result of the disruption in Paul's life, but also as a result of the disruptions in Priscilla and Aquila's lives.

Look at verse 2. See, Priscilla and Aquila, they had to leave their home. They had to leave their business in Rome because the Roman Emperor Claudius, you can look this up in history books, he banished all the Jewish people. And this would include many Christians who are considered as a sect within the Jewish faith.

[5 : 55] All the Jewish people were banished out of Rome. And so you have Italian Priscilla and her Jewish husband Aquila, this ethnically mixed couple with probably tons of disruption in their own backstory because of, you know, the different family and religious backgrounds.

You have them forced to find a new home and restart a new business in Corinth. And yet it is here in Corinth where this ethnically mixed couple with an unconventional backstory and the Apostle Paul, this discouraged missionary, it's where they all, the three of them, happen to connect and where God begins to gather a gospel-centered family.

But again, it's not immediate. It's slow going. They have to pay the bills. They have to work with their hands six days a week. This great theologian and missionary Apostle Paul, he works with leather and cow hides and he puts together tents and maybe he even goes to the Corinthian marketplace and gives sales pitches.

But none of it's in vain. None of it's in vain. He does it all with a purpose and he does it all in community with Priscilla and Aquila who share his purpose and who share his passion about not just making tents and selling them, but bearing witness to Christ.

And verse 3 says that they lived together and they worked together and they became a tight-knit family in Christ with an intentional rhythm. Verse 4 says that every Sabbath, Paul would go out and try to grow this family.

[7 : 13] Finally, reasoning in the synagogue, trying to persuade people of the true Messiah for who knows how long, maybe weeks, maybe months. But like in Athens, not much seems to happen in Corinth.

Until verse 5. Until verse 5, this family of three in Corinth, they suddenly become a family, sorry, this family of three in Corinth, they suddenly become a family of five as Paul's missionary teammates join them.

You have Silas, he's a Jewish brother from Jerusalem, and then you have Timothy who's half Jewish and half Greek. He's a convert from Lystra and they become a family of five. And most commentators believe that Silas and Timothy coming to Paul, they were bringing financial gifts from other churches that Paul had helped, other parts of the family abroad.

They brought gifts to help Paul, as it says in verse 5, to devote himself exclusively to preaching Jesus the Messiah. And this, this is where things take off.

Paul returns to full-time ministry and more people come to know Jesus and the family grows even despite resistance. So though Paul's rejected in verse 6 by, you know, Jewish opposition in the synagogue, a Gentile there, Titius Justice, he joins the family.

[8 : 22] And he opens up his house right next door to be the new synagogue, right? The new house church in Corinth. And so the family grows to a family of six and now two households.

And then verse 8 says that Crispus, the synagogue leader himself, though the rest of the Jewish Corinthians opposed Paul, he and his family acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah they were waiting for and they joined the family too at great cost to themselves, right?

This honored leader of the synagogue now shamefully kicked out as an alleged heretic of his own synagogue. And he's now in a new place of worship next door with his family, estranged from their formerly beloved community.

And yet it says in verse 8 that in addition to Crispus, many believed and were baptized. And the family grew to more than nine, more than three households, women, men, children from backgrounds that were quite diverse from all different kinds of occupations, Jewish people, half-blooded and whole-blooded, Romans and others from, you know, Lystra and Pontus in modern-day Turkey, all because this is what the Spirit does.

This is what the Spirit does. He gathers a disparate community of disrupted people into a sacrificial family of witnesses in Christ. So the question for us today, Christ Church, is why not also here?

[9 : 34] Why not also here? I know many of us, all of us, in so many ways that I don't even know about, have felt so disrupted over the past two years by all that's happened in the world and in our church, right?

So many of us have lost friends and family to COVID or to people just moving away out of the bay or maybe just out of our church for various reasons. You know, I especially feel for our Oakland community, our people who once worshipped in the Oakland location, never got to say goodbye to their sacred place of worship, never got to say goodbye to the people they most loved.

And now you're here, and it's like, I don't know anyone here. Church used to be family, and now it's strangers again. And I don't want to take that lightly at all, like just get over it, move on, no.

I want to encourage us to gather and to grieve together and to find some closure and to look for hope together. But also with sensitivity to all the disruption that so many of us have faced in the past years, can I remind us of the God that we worship?

A God who made much out of Paul's disruption, out of Priscilla and Aquila and Crispus' disruptions, out of massive disruptions, a church in Corinth was born and grew.

[10 : 41] And some of Paul's longest letters and instructions, letters to the Corinthians, which we now call the Scriptures, they were written to this diverse and wealthy church in this important city of international commerce, where many came to know Christ as a result of disruption.

Christ Church, could it be that as painful as these disruptions have been for our church family, could it be that God is building another wonderful family of witnesses amongst us here in the East Bay?

Maybe one that we didn't expect, maybe one that we wouldn't have chosen, but nonetheless a wonderful one. And would it not be worth our time and our presence? You know, in my experience, God has a beautiful way of orchestrating unexpected relationships and surprising synergies and coincidence that he loves to use for his purposes.

You know, it was no accident that Paul was alone in Corinth, and then came Priscilla and Aquila, banished out of Rome. That wasn't an accident. And so I really want to challenge us to lean into community in this season of our church and to consider the power of the ministry of time and presence because Christ Church, we need each other.

We so need each other. Earlier this year, I finished a book by the U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy titled, Together, The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World.

[12 : 02] And in it, he writes about how when he was first appointed as the U.S. Surgeon General, he, you know, he did a tour of the nation because he wanted to discern all the biggest public health issues.

And he said that going in, he expected to find, you know, diabetes, obesity, anxiety and depression, the opioid crisis. And he did find all these things. But the one thing that he didn't expect to find, the one strand that wove actually all these public health issues together, he argued, was the problem of loneliness.

The problem of loneliness. And you know, I found this too as a pastor. As a pastor, the number one question that I like to ask people to make them feel known and seen is, are you lonely?

Are you lonely? And people just open up and they feel so known and seen just by being asked that question. Because see, we were made for relationship. We were made for connection and belonging and community.

But again, what does this take? It takes time. And it takes presence. And it takes investment. You know, there's something that ordinary, unstructured time and presence do that knits people

together.

[13:09] Sure, Paul and Priscilla and Aquila, they probably studied the Bible together and prayed and, you know, did stuff like that. They went to the synagogue together. But I think what really glued them together was that they just were together.

They just were together. They did life together. They were eating and laughing and working and doing household chores together. See, God made us to have up, in, and out shaped lives. And when our upward adoration of God and our outward service unto God are shared in a family of people that we truly believe that we are in with, that we truly believe we belong to, the sense of belonging and support there are incredibly powerful.

And that's why you're all still invited to the Ong household, all right? Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays work best for us. Some of you have taken us up on this. The offer is legit, I promise. Or sign up for Dinners for Eight.

Today's the last day to sign up for that. I'm gonna start socially engineering that tomorrow. But sign up today. Dinners for Eight. Get to know people in our church. Or come to the retreat. Come to the retreat.

[14:09] Just hang out with us. Climb a wall with someone. Go on a walk with someone. Go for a hike. Go to Santa Cruz Beach. Shh, you know, we're even willing to help with scholarships if you need help to come to the retreat because that's how much we value this sense of family that we need as a church.

It's not just wasteful time hanging out. It's the ministry of time and presence that builds a family. So let's be in each other's lives. Let's be in each other's spaces.

Let's hold each other's babies. Let's help each other with each other's yards and home projects.

And let's consider sticking around. What if we saw the Bay Area not as just a place to go and get, but as a place to go and give?

Not as a place to simply pursue our careers, but to settle in and work out our vocations. In Corinth, this place where Paul met strong resistance to the gospel and initially slow momentum, Jesus told him, stay.

Still, just stay there. And it says in verse 11, he stayed a year and a half, way longer than he had ever spent at any of his other previous missionary destinations. And we cannot underestimate the simple but powerful ministry of time and presence.

[15:17] And it's not just time and presence, though. It's not just our time that's needed to build this family of witnesses in Christ. It's also our talent and our treasures. Priscilla and Aquila were small business owners, tent makers, it says.

But even as they excelled at their work, they saw it not just as work, but as vocation, right? As a calling. And they never lost sight of this calling from God and for God.

Priscilla and Aquila were tent makers unto the glory of God for the sake of bearing witness to Christ. You know, if you read through the New Testament very carefully, you'll find Paul mentioning Priscilla and Aquila in very many places throughout, always faithful in the background.

Apparently, the bond between this gospel-gathered family of three was so close that Priscilla and Aquila, they traveled with Paul. They picked up their business again out of Corinth, and they moved it to Ephesus, and they helped them plant another church there, probably having to start another business there.

And in addition to their day jobs, they mentored young preachers and evangelists like Apollos, who would go and serve the church abroad. And then eventually in the book of Romans, we see that they also ended up back in Rome, helping the church there.

[16:24] This is what we are called to, no matter if we are pastors or not. We are called to a life of ministry, a life to bearing witness to Christ. Christ and Priscilla and Aquila are stellar examples of this, stellar examples of serving Christ and his church with our treasures and our talents and our vocations.

And that's the key word right there, vocations. Vocations, not jobs or simply careers, but vocations. Something with a sense of calling from God upon our whole lives to something bigger than ourselves, something many of us as Americans have gotten away from.

I just finished another book called Habits of the Heart, Individualism and Commitment in American Life. Its lead author is the late Robert Bellah. He was a sociologist right here at Cal.

And one of the observations made in this book was that the hyper-individualism of our American culture has led to most of us not seeing our work anymore as vocation.

Vocations where we commit to something we feel called to and use our gifts in service of a community or an organization we truly believe in. Rather than seeing our jobs as vocations now, most of us see work as what?

[17 : 33] A career. An individualistic pursuit where we pursue our own advancement and personal ambitions unfettered by commitment to our organizations or the society that we inhabit.

But the result of such individualism and selfishness, they argue, has led to loose commitments. Very, very loose, frail commitments and communities that aren't bound by solidarity and commitment to grand and virtuous purposes, but rather to a variety of what they call lifestyle enclaves.

Lifestyle enclaves. Communities that are loosely connected by shared self-interests and homogenous consumer preferences. So for example, when we consider switching jobs or moving homes, we don't think so much anymore about how this might affect our company or our relationships in our community or how it might affect our local church and what God is doing there. We just move on to pursue more money, more status, more space, inching closer and closer to that idealized lifestyle that we're going for. Not for Christ, not for His church, but selfishly for our own simple comforts.

Christ Church, what are we living for? What are we giving ourselves to? Who are we giving ourselves to? And why not Christ? And why not His church?

[18 : 50] And I say this kind of feeling a little bit awkward because I'm a pastor, right? So who benefits the most from your investment of time, talent, and treasure in the church? After all, if so many of you weren't already so faithfully invested in this church, I wouldn't be here.

It'd be hard for me to feed my family. And honestly, I often feel weird about this relationship. Like, oh man, people are investing in the church. It's almost like everyone here is my boss, so I better perform, so I can keep my job and feed my family.

But you know, it's examples like this in Acts chapter 18 with Paul and Timothy and Silas that snapped me out of that. Where I see Silas and Timothy bringing financial support to Paul from church families that loved Paul, that weren't seeking to get anything back, but they really believed in what he was doing and they wanted him to be free to devote himself exclusively to preaching Christ.

What I see in Acts 18 is not a business. The church is not a business. Again, it's a family. And families pitch in and they support each other and they, you know, it's not transactional.

It's not transactional at all, but it's in a way that communicates their love and their support and their shared values and goals and commitments. Did you know that behind me and my ministry here at Christ Church is an incredibly supportive, Jesus-loving family in Christ?

[20 : 16] For example, in addition to the amazing nacho bar that my mom and my sister and my aunts help set up for my ordination refreshments, they do a lot here to help me serve well. When Chelsea used to work on Saturdays, I have a whole army of aunts and in-laws and parents and family friends who have watched our girls like more times than I can count on Saturdays so that I could finish my sermon or hang out with some of you who are more available on the weekends.

And in my second year here when I was fundraising as a part of my internship at Christ Church, many of my family and friends from across the Bay Area, all different churches in the Bay, they helped me raise over \$40,000 because they believed in this ministry here that I was taking part in. They believed that we want to be leading people into deeper relationship with Christ and they wanted to see me do that. And you know, as humbled as I felt by the support and as thankful as I am, you know what I've never felt?

I've never felt in debt. I've never felt obligated to pay these people back. Why? Because they're family. This is what family does, especially families united in Christ.

And that's what I believe God wants to do here at Christ Church. Build a sacrificially invested family in Christ. And you might be looking around saying, I don't know, I don't really like this community as much as others, as much as my basketball league or my climbing gym or the people I work with.

[21 : 45] I get along so much better with people who are like me. Same profession, same hobbies, same ethnicities, same class, same lifestyles. It's so much easier with people who are like us, right? Oh yeah, of course.

And we should leverage our shared commonalities to bear witness to Christ. But our God is not in the easy business of simply forming social clubs and homogenous shared interest groups.

Our God is in the business of building His church, a family that's rich in all manner of diversity, even building from the humblest and the lowest amongst us.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians in his first letter, brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards. Not many were influential. Not many were of noble birth.

But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things and the things that are not.

[22 : 45] The family God built in Corinth wasn't your ideal preferred cream of the crop, but it's who God brought together in His perfect wisdom as a church family. May God do that here, Christ Church.

May God do that here amongst us. But let me say this, it's not just family for the sake of family, it's not just community for the sake of community. We can get that anywhere. But followers of Jesus are called to live up, in, and out.

We are in community in order to serve our world, to serve this city. See, a loving community is the way that our Savior Jesus intended for His people to bear witness about Him.

Jesus said in John 13, a new commandment I give to you, that you love one another just as I have loved you. You also are to love one another. By this, all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another.

See, this family we build is not an end in itself, but it's a witness to the good news about Jesus. It's community for the sake of, in the service of, the gospel.

[23 : 49] I'm not just advocating warm and fuzzy friendships here. I'm talking about the gospel. It's all about the gospel. It's all about the good news of what God has done in Christ to reconcile people to Himself.

Do we truly grasp that this is a life and death matter of eternal significance? The gospel, that which is of first importance, the power of God unto salvation for all who believe.

In verse 6, you may have been thrown off, maybe made uncomfortable by the words that Paul speaks here in verse 6. When Paul says to these Jewish people who oppose him in the synagogue, he says, your blood be on your own heads.

And while I probably wouldn't recommend that you say that to people who you share Jesus with and don't accept your message, Paul's words actually reveal a lot about how we are to understand his message and our identity and responsibility as witnesses of Christ.

See, Paul's harsh statement actually says far more about how he views and understands his message and responsibility than whatever judgments it seems like he's rendering upon his opposition. When Paul says, your blood be on your own heads to people who reject the gospel, what's implied here is that first, this is a matter of life and death.

[25 : 03] Whether or not we accept the good news of Jesus, there is only one way to be restored to God, only one way to resurrection life and it's through union with Jesus Christ alone.

And secondly, what's implied by Paul's harsh words is that before he shared the news of Jesus with these people, their blood was on his head. It was on Paul's head.

He was responsible and he knew that. So Christchurch, do we have this sense of urgency? Do we have this sense of responsibility about Jesus and all the people around us who do not know him?

Do we understand the stakes of living in Christ versus living outside of Christ? The gospel is everything. The gospel is everything. It isn't one idea among many to just mix and match with whatever else we deem interesting and useful.

It's the power of God unto salvation, a salvation that is sorely needed because of the brokenness of our world and the curse of sin and our complicit estrangement from this God.

[26 : 05] Is it really not worth sharing? Is it really not worth sharing? Is it really not worth bearing witness to even the atheist Penn Jillette of the magician duo Penn and Teller, even he thinks as an atheist that this gospel is worth sharing.

In a story he told years ago about a Christian who went to see him and who went to see his show and then gave him a Bible after the show, Penn said this, I don't respect people who don't proselytize.

I don't respect that at all. If you believe that there's a heaven and a hell and that people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life and you think that it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward, how much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize?

How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that? Christchurch, do we not have news worth sharing?

In spite of our fears of embarrassment and rejection and socially awkward moments, of all people, Paul, Apostle Paul, he had every reason to be fearful and to stop speaking and to be silent.

[27 : 18] He was stripped and beaten with rods and then flogged and imprisoned in Philippi and then in the next city, Thessalonica, a mob and a city riot formed against him and then in Athens, he was sent to the Areopagus where he wondered if he was going to get executed like Socrates.

No wonder Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians that when he was among them, he was there with much fear and trembling. Yes, it is a scary thing to bear witness to Christ and we don't know exact outcomes for what will happen when we do but is the glory of Christ and the eternal good of our neighbors not worth bearing witness about amidst our fears?

FDR said, courage is not the absence of fear but rather the assessment that something else is more important than fear. Christ Church, what is more important than the gospel?

And couldn't it be that just as Jesus said to Paul in verses 9 and 10, do not be afraid, keep on speaking, do not be silent for I am with you and no one is going to attack and harm you because I have many people in this city.

Couldn't it be that he's saying the same to us today? And look, Jesus keeps his word as we see in verses 12 to 17 that even when yet another mob attacked Paul, brought him to be judged by the proconsul in Corinth, this pagan Gentile proconsul, he sets an important legal precedent that Paul and the message of Christianity are actually not a criminal offense to be punished and Paul was cleared to go.

[28 : 51] Jesus kept his word to him and more importantly, Jesus kept his word to Paul that he would be with Paul and that he did have many people in that city and that's how the church in Corinth was born and built and this is how I pray that Christ's church will be rebuilt out of a peace that Jesus is with us, out of an excitement that he has many people in this city yet to be revealed who will join our family in Christ and know the joy of our salvation.

I've already seen it happen so many times. I've only been here at Christ Church for three years but I've seen so much of what God is doing. People from China coming to know Jesus. People from Iran coming to know Jesus.

People with paths of prostitution. People with paths in the occult. People struggling with diagnoses of autism and bipolar. Falling in love with Jesus and joining our eclectic family and making a difference already here in this world bearing witness to the good news of Jesus.

Christ Church, God's not done with us here. He's not done with us here. He has people that he wants to be brought to him. He has people in this city that he wants to be brought to him.

Do we understand that? Do we understand that? That we cannot fail. Jesus said, my sheep will hear my voice. We cannot fail. Don't you want to be a part of that?

[30 : 16] Part of the joy of bringing people into the fold of God, into this loving community that worships Jesus Christ. Don't you want that? Are we willing to believe that God can and will bear incredible fruit and gather a wonderful family of witnesses amongst us, not in spite of, but through the disruptions in our lives and in our church?

Will we believe this enough to lean in and give ourselves to this family project called Christ's Church? Will you pray with me? Lord, this is what we want.

We believe that you have people in this city yet to be revealed and we want to find them. We love that the sheep will hear your voice. So give us boldness to speak your word so that they can hear the voice of their good shepherd, the shepherd who lays his life down for his sheep.

What kind of shepherd does that? People out there, Lord, people who do not know you are seeking shepherds who will not lay their lives down for them. But we have the good shepherd.

Convince us that he is good and make us a community that's centered around this good shepherd because of family, God, a family that is so invested in the kingdom of God that so believes the gospel to be good news, the best news, that you do amazing things in this place in the East Bay and we rejoice every Sunday seeing these things unfold.

[31 : 59] May it be so here, Lord. We love you. We trust you. And we want to give you all praise and glory because of who you are and what you've done for us in Christ.

In his name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.