

Power and Persuasion in Proclaiming the Good News

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Date: 25 July 2021

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[0 : 00] Let's now turn to the book of Acts, Acts chapter 18. Acts chapter 18. And we're going to read the first six verses of Acts chapter 18.

After this, after Paul had been in Athens, after this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontius, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius, the emperor Claudius, had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome.

And he went to see them. And because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and worked, for they were tent makers by trade. And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks.

When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that Christ, that the Christ was Jesus.

And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, your blood be on your heads. I am innocent. From now on, I will go to the Gentiles.

[1 : 23] May God add his blessing to that reading from his holy word. And four main key points, I suppose, to consider this morning from the passage.

Pride, well, we'll see in what sense this passage really tells us about the pride of man, as opposed to the humility that God gives and to be expected of those who trust in the Lord Jesus.

Providence. God's working out all things for the glory of his name. Persuasion. How, when you're telling of the Lord Jesus, yes, you're there to persuade people using God-given reason.

Persuasion to direct people's minds to the things of truth. Unless you're persuading to proclaim, to proclaim the good news of the Lord Jesus.

You might say power and persuasion in the work of the gospel. You know, there are absolutely no coincidences in the work of the kingdom, the work of gospel ministry.

[2 : 33] Absolutely no chance occurrences that happen outside of God's overruling hand. Because God is sovereign.

God is in control. God works all things together for good. And certainly three weeks ago, when Andy was preaching here from this very pulpit, Andy preached from Acts 17 about the unknown God and how God is described as the unknown God.

Still, God can be made known. God can be known. Andy was preaching from Acts 17 when Andy was speaking in relation to Paul's visit to Athens and Paul preaching there to Greek thinkers, Greek philosophers.

I'd planned a little mini-series long before Andy preached that sermon. And it so happens that today's sermon was designed to be from Acts 18, the immediate chapter after Andy preached.

And there was absolutely no collusion in the plan, absolutely no coincidence. And as we'll see, there were no coincidences in Paul moving from Athens to Corinth, Paul going from one great city to another great city in Paul's missionary work.

[3 : 50] And there are no coincidences, even in a small congregation like our own one in the 21st century, there were no coincidences in an apostle's work in the 1st century AD.

And so we're going to embark on a new mini-series in our morning services, really in the whole theme of mission, looking at the progress of mission in the early church and seeking to apply principles for our own seeking to draw others to see the name of the Lord Jesus, to put trust in him.

And we're here, of course, to worship God. We're here to praise God that God's work continues, whether that work's continuing in the great cities of the world, whether in the small towns and villages of the world, even in our own land.

The gospel continues to be preached and proclaimed to all peoples, whether by 1st century apostles or 21st century followers of the Lord Jesus, because Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

And Jesus must be proclaimed, as Paul proclaimed Jesus, as the Christ, the Messiah, the Savior of the world. And as we said, we're going to seek to learn lessons in the work of mission, the work of seeking to proclaim the good news of the Lord Jesus, learning from the work of missionaries such as Paul here, and apply these lessons in our own age, lessons that are going to be applied, not just for ourselves here or at this very age that we're living in, but for all ages until Jesus returns.

[5 : 37] But let's just get a little bit of the context, the background of this, well, the beginning of this chapter. And let's just go back a little bit to Paul being in Athens, because actually Paul had never intended to be in that great city.

Paul had actually gone to Athens to escape from those who were attacking him in a place called Berea, Jewish pursuers of him in Berea. But Paul didn't waste any opportunity.

Paul was in Athens, and those of you who were in the service three weeks ago, you'd learn that Paul preached to these Greek listeners.

Paul preached the name of the Lord Jesus. Paul preached of Jesus as the one true Savior. And there, as he preached there in Athens, that great place of learning, of seeking to learn more, even a place called Mars Hill, Paul testified to the God of creation and the God of salvation.

And yes, as is still the case today, as Paul preached the name of Jesus, he was mocked, he was sneered at. But even those who heard, they were from those who heard, some influential people who were converted.

[7 : 04] Paul was being used of God to tell of the God of salvation and to tell that salvation is through Christ alone. God directing Paul's life in all kinds of circumstances so that the gospel was proclaimed, the gospel lived out, the gospel shown to be the one true, true word.

And you, who are his, is for you to continue to proclaim the good news of Jesus, to tell others of who Jesus is, to tell others that he's your Savior, he's your Lord, and that you're his because he first loved you.

That's the proclamation that you're giving. That's the witness that you give to others because you know Jesus as your Lord and Savior, just as Paul knew Jesus as his Lord and Savior.

And even if, as yet, you don't know Jesus as Lord and Savior, well, you're hearing his name proclaimed even this morning. You're here not by any coincidence. You're not here by any accident.

You're here because God has given you to be here, to hear that most precious name, in the name of Jesus. It's no accident that any of us are here this morning, and it certainly was no accident that Paul left Athens to go to Corinth.

[8 : 30] Fairly short distance, you can look up in the map, it's something, a little bit less than 100 miles from Athens to Corinth. But Paul, again, being sent by God to that city.

But that fairly short distance, well, there'd be great advances made, great advances in the work of the gospel. And this information that the author of this book, Luke, gives us, this information tells us of the work, the perfect work of God and God working through circumstances for the gospel to flourish, for God's people to know him, to know his presence, to know his protection in that work.

As we see, particularly in the first three verses of this chapter, look at them again, even the first few words. After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth.

Corinth. And this really speaks of pride. You'll think, why? How on earth can that sentence, that little sentence, tell us of pride?

Well, if you mention the name Corinth today, I don't think there's going to be much kind of recognition of that name. Not a great deal of association of anything important in Corinth.

[9 : 50] I mean, it still exists as a city. It's around 30,000 people today. It's a fairly small port and a peninsula. But in Paul's day, Corinth was one of the great cities of the world.

There were something like three quarters of a million people there. It was a great commercial city. It had a very mixed population of people from a large number of different nationalities.

It was a city that was renowned for its games. We often think of just Athens, you know, as a place of the great games. But no, Corinth had a great games every two years.

And it was a city that was renowned for its pride. And certainly those who first read the book of Acts, when they would read that sentence, Paul went to Corinth.

Immediately, they would know that this was a city that was renowned for its pride. God leading Paul to the city of pride.

[10 : 52] It was a city that was proud of its intellect. It was a city that was proud of its architecture. A city that was proud of its founder.

Its founder was Julius Caesar. Well, we've all heard of Julius Caesar, I'm sure. It was a city that was even proud of its immorality. It was a city that was proud of its wealth.

As we said, proud of the world-famous games that were held there every two years. So, pride in this great city, this massive city, this population that was far, far bigger than Athens.

And even when Paul was actually writing his letters to the church there in Corinth, Paul would often warn them against pride. So, this is a city renowned for its pride.

But it's the same city that God called Paul to. A city in which a church was planted. And, of course, a city in which that church was given certainly two letters from Paul that are part of Scripture.

[11 : 57] A city that was so proud of its secular values, its material values. In fact, it was a city where Paul went to actually in fear and trembling so much because of this city and its pride and its, you know, its self-centeredness.

But 2,000 years later, the same gospel has been proclaimed into a world that's so proud of its secular values, its material values.

Even, if you read the newspapers yesterday, the number of times that you read the word proud or pride was really quite astonishing. But yes, this is the world, the same world that the Lord's people are called into.

And called into, yes, with fear and weakness. But remember, you go into this world with the gospel, not in your own strength, but with the power of God.

And of course, the pride of man is real. And yes, that pride is powerful. Pride in self.

[13 : 04] Pride in all the kind of self-designated identities that people are so proud to associate with. And you see it every day, the force of pride, the pride of immorality that flies in the face of God's word.

Pride of wealth. Pride of sporting achievement. The pride of cultural background, just as was the case in Corinth. But that pride is not going to defeat the power of God.

It's not going to defeat God's word. It's not going to defeat God's people. Because we proclaim the one who is greatest of all, the Lord Jesus. and we proclaim the cross of Jesus, the cross that's the total antithesis, the total opposite of pride.

And you, who are the Lord's people, you proclaim the one who came to save. And you know that in yourself, you have nothing of yourself to bring before God to merit salvation.

No, you bow before the eternal Son of God, the Lord Jesus, in whom there was no pride in self. Jesus who, who made himself nothing when he came from heaven to earth.

[14 : 23] Jesus took the form of a servant. Jesus lived that life of perfect obedience to his Father. And Jesus died on that cross. The total, as we said, the total antithesis, the total opposite of pride, he died on that cross for you and for me.

So look to the one who gave up himself in humble service. Because he's made it possible for you to be saved, for you to live for him, for you to give yourself to him, because he first gave himself for you.

He gave himself so that you might know eternal life in his presence. And it's given you that power, that enabling to demolish pride in yourself and to live a life of, well, a life of self-denial, to take up your cross and to follow Jesus.

And pray the more that God gives you that enabling, that power to abandon any kind of Corinth-like mind, that Corinth-like pride, and have a Jesus-centered focus that gives glory not to yourself, but gives glory to God the Lord.

So Corinth, that city of pride, Paul is sent to, and Paul's sent to that city in the providence of God. Look at the details, verse 2 and 3.

[15 : 50] And Paul found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome, and he went to see them.

And because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade. I read that passage again because it really strikes you how God has worked, not just in the life of Paul, but in the life of others, to bring together these like-minded people to further the work of the gospel.

The providence of God, you know, working in particular circumstances, even God overruling to bring to bring about a God glorifying impact in the work of the gospel.

There's God working in the lives of these two individuals called Aquila and Priscilla. They've been expelled from Rome, the emperor Claudius has expelled all Jews from there, and they've come to Corinth to find safety, and eventually they're going to come into contact with Paul.

And so there's God overruling in that expulsion. So that Christian couple, they're going to meet up with Paul. They're going to be some of Paul's closest companions, and they're going to be as companions not just in Corinth, but beyond Corinth.

[17 : 17] And certainly from what we read here, it's certainly evident that this Jewish couple had been converted. The great work of God had changed their lives. But even the little details are important, and details that maybe at the time would have seemed so petty.

But God even working through the little details for his glory. I mean, this Jewish couple, this Jewish Christian couple, they're tent makers. Many people were tent makers then.

But Paul himself, of course, he'd been a tent maker by trade. Paul had the same cultural background, he had the same professional background, and God's working through these backgrounds to bring these individuals together.

And of course, with Priscilla and Aquila being converted, Paul himself, a Jew converted, they're sharing the same faith. They've got the same background, as we said, the same trade.

Paul is no longer going to be alone in that city. Aquila and Priscilla are going to meet up with Paul. Even in the circumstances that led these individuals to court, the same kind of circumstances, the circumstances of oppression.

[18 : 39] Priscilla and Aquila being expelled from their hometown. Paul having to leave Berea and then leave Athens and go to Corinth. Let's bring this even to our present circumstances, our present day.

You know, the church certainly, there's no doubt, the church is not just a congregation, but the church generally is composed of people of different backgrounds. Yes, different abilities, different gifts, but you know, there are many occasions when in the providence of God, God brings together people of similar backgrounds to share the good news and to do it in particular circumstances.

God will use like-minded people to work together, to grow together, to mission together. Paul would later write of Priscilla and Aquila that they were his fellow workers in Christ and that's surely the case even today of the Lord's people being fellow workers in Christ Jesus.

As we said, yes, a congregation, a church is made up of people of different backgrounds, but there's that unity and diversity. There are going to be many opportunities and pray, God, that there will be further opportunities even here for you to work together, even for people of similar gifts and interests to work together for the sake of the Lord Jesus.

Even apparently little things, even things that might appear just in the margins, God will use and use to cement relationships, to build up his church, to be effective witnesses because of the gospel.

[20 : 30] But we can also say this, there will be circumstances and circumstances of providence when even God will bring together believer and non-believer, those who have maybe similar backgrounds, and for the believer to be the more effective in his witness to an unbeliever.

And yes, that happens in the work of ministry. I don't just mean pastoral ministry, but yes, the work of ministry, a minister so often, not always, there are exceptions, of course, but a minister so often will be the most effective in a place, well, where he has some connection of background or affinity with those whom God sends him to.

But you know, a Christian is going to be so effective and effective, of course, with the Spirit's enabling. When there's some particular connection or some affinity, some strong interest, some link with those whom he or she is witnessing to, the converted drug addict is going to be far more effective in ministry with those who have similar addictions.

Christians, the person who suffered so much in bereavement is going to have that greater understanding of those who have suffered such painful loss.

The Christian academic is going to have a connection, a strong connection with even non-believing academics. The Christian businessman, the Christian businesswoman is going to have that identity with fellow business people.

[22 : 10] Christian who served in the armed forces, or even have such a strong interest in the armed forces, is going to be able to identify with people of similar backgrounds. The converted Jew is going to have such a resonance with those of the Jewish faith.

We can go on and on with similar examples. But of course, the bottom line has to be love. Love for the lost. That heart's desire to tell whomsoever God brings before you.

The heart's desire to tell the good news of the Lord Jesus. And there'll be times, there'll be circumstances, yes, when God will bring you into contact with those of similar backgrounds, and for you to have that effectiveness towards an unbeliever, believer.

And to present the gospel in a persuasive way. Because that's what we read here of Paul there in Corinth, in the synagogue there in Corinth.

Verse 4, and he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks. Now let's be clear here. Paul's certainly not going to compromise one little bit in proclaiming the good news of the Lord Jesus.

[23 : 33] He's going to preach Christ. He's going to tell of the historic truth of the Lord Jesus. He's going to tell of the spiritual reality of faith in Christ alone for salvation.

That's why he does as a preacher. And that's what he did in Athens. But we're told there in Athens that in proclaiming the good news, chapter 17, verse 17, we're told that he reasoned with the Jews, devout people and ordinary folks in the marketplace.

In other words, in his preaching, he used reason and persuasion. That method to bring hearers of the truth of the gospel, that method, if you like, of argument, presenting evidence, in other words, addressing the mind, to get the mind to think differently, to be persuaded that Jesus is Lord, to be persuaded that Jesus is the only Savior, to be persuaded that it's in him and him alone that you put your faith and trust for salvation.

And let's again be clear here in the work of evangelism, that you never lose sight of the tools that God blesses his people with, even the gift of reason and persuasion, godly reason to direct human minds to the mind of God, godly persuasion to reach out to skeptics, you know, because people need to hear even the Bible read and the Bible proclaimed in a language they can understand, in words they can understand.

You know, think of the different tools that are used, the different Bible studies that are used, think of things like Christianity Explored or the Essentials course that was run recently.

[25 : 32] These courses use godly reason and persuasion. Students are trained at our seminary in Edinburgh to use reason and persuasion in an effect of evangelism.

I mean, persuasion is scriptural and will be used to proclaim the Lord Jesus. Paul used persuasion and so must I and so must you.

You know, people aren't converted without the mind, without the mind being exercised to accept the truth of scripture. So people are going to use their minds as well as engage their hearts with the good use of salvation.

People have to be convicted in their minds as well as their hearts to believe that God is there, God's word is true and that the message of salvation is real and that the promise of salvation is no fairy tale.

You who are converted, you receive Jesus, yes, you received him with all your heart and you used your mind to receive the gospel message and recognize that that message is true and you accepted in mind as you believed in your heart, that you were a sinner and that the Lord Jesus died for you.

[26 : 56] And of course, people only come to Jesus because the Holy Spirit transforms a dead heart and gives life to that heart. But at the same time, as somebody's written, the way of conversion is conscious and willing.

Otherwise, there would be no need for preachers. There would be no need for theological education. There would be no need to recount the great preachers of the past, people like Charles Spurgeon or Martyn Lloyd Jones.

There would be no need for the missionary zeal of people like the apostle Paul and his companions proclaiming the good news of salvation. That good news proclaimed that you see in verses 5 and 6 where you read there of Paul doing the work that God had called him to do there in Corinth.

Proclamation because we're told that he was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. There's Paul absolutely committed to preaching to his fellows, to those whom he's preaching to, that Jesus is Lord.

But you know, as every preacher knows, there will be those who refuse the free offer of salvation in Christ alone. There will be those who turn away from that invitation to come to Jesus and receive him as Lord and Saviour.

[28 : 24] And Paul certainly knew that and he experienced that. He knew rejection of himself and rejection of the gospel. But in faithfulness, Paul continued to proclaim the good news, even when he was being rejected.

But notice, there's Paul been rejected by so many there in Corinth, rejected in that synagogue that he's preaching. Paul, under God's inspiration, God's direction, Paul makes a great decision.

He's going to preach the good news now, not just to Jews in a synagogue, but he's going to preach the good news to Gentiles, to non-Jews. And it's that proclamation that continues today and it's going to continue until Jesus returns.

Give praise to God that the gospel has been preached both to Jew and to non-Jew. Give praise to God that the good news has been preached to Gentiles in Livingston and Leith and Lewis and in locations all around the world.

Because the pride of man is being attacked whenever the gospel is proclaimed. And it's been attacked by the weapons of God's word. The gospel continues to be preached and proclaimed and the persuasion of the good news proclaimed.

[29 : 49] Minds are being attacked, we might say. Minds are being called to think about the Lord Jesus, think about his claims as Lord, as Savior, as Redeemer.

And give thanks then, give thanks even now for the proclamation of the good news happening, even at this very moment in this world of space and time. And pray that God will raise up more to proclaim that good news.

Pray for conversions. Pray for preachers. Pray for yourself, for your own words of witness. And yes, pray for those who as yet don't know the Lord Jesus as Savior.

Pray even now for someone whom God has brought to your heart, that they'll receive him in mind and in heart, and that they'll know the joy of salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior.

Amen. And let us pray. Our Lord, our God, our Heavenly Father, as we rejoice in your name, as we rejoice in the continued proclamation of the Lord Jesus.

[31 : 02] Lord, we pray that your word will not return to empty, but accomplish what you desire. may there be sinners saved even this day, even in this land, even in this town.

Lord, may the word of God penetrate the hearts of those who were once dead in sin, but are made alive through the glorious gospel of the Lord Jesus.

So hear us, Lord, as we continue in worship before you now. Forgive, Lord, anything said amiss. Forgive us, Lord, for the times when we have wandered even in our minds in worship of you.

Strengthen our hearts, we pray, to follow you. And forgive us, we pray again, our many sins we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.