

Church 2.0

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”
(Acts 1:8 ESV)*

“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (Acts 28:28 ESV)

The Word Did It All In Corinth

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Acts 18:1-17

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Acts 18:1; that’s on page 927 in your pew Bibles. We’re looking today at the conclusion of Paul’s second missionary journey. Corinth was the last stop on the tour, so to speak, and after spending a great deal of time in Corinth Paul returned for some rest and recuperation to his home base in Antioch.

We know more about his relationship with Corinth than just about any other city he worked in largely because they were galactically dysfunctional. The Corinthians LED THE LEAGUE in bad behaviour, wrong ideas and rotten attitudes. Now, to be fair, they were also probably the LEAST REFINED and WORST PREPARED people that Paul ever dealt with. The church in Corinth did not have a very deep Jewish foundation like so many other churches had. As we will see in just a moment, Paul got kicked out of the Jewish synagogue fairly early on in his ministry there and so most of his converts were Gentiles with very little Bible background – we talked about the challenges that can pose last Sunday.

And they were morally corrupted.

The city of Corinth was famous for immorality EVEN in the wildly corrupt Roman world. There were SO MANY PROSTITUTES working the streets in Corinth that the word *korinthiastes* actually became a common synonym for a prostitute. It would be like if the drug problem got so out of control in Orillia that throughout all North America it became common to refer to a drug

addict as an Orillia-ite. We might get there, if the grace of God does not intervene – but the Corinthians WERE THERE. They were FAMOUSLY IMMORAL people with fabulously little bible background – and so we aren't surprised that they had their troubles in the early days of their Christian faith.

But Paul stuck with them – he wrote them 4 letters! We only have 2 in our Bibles, but we know there were two others because Paul refers to them. In 1 Corinthians 5:9 he says:

“I wrote to you in my letter...” (1 Corinthians 5:9 ESV)

Alright, well, to state the obvious if in FIRST CORINTHIANS he refers to a previous letter, then 1 Corinthians is not really 1 Corinthians is it? And then in 2 Corinthians he refers to a SEVERE LETTER which is not 1 Corinthians. He refers to that in 2 Corinthians 2 – so if you add all of that up, we know that Paul wrote these people AT LEAST 4 letters – so we have a lot of content to draw from today as we consider his ministry in that city.

We're going to read the whole summary that Luke provides of Paul's 18 month stay and then we are going to ZOOM IN on the vision that Paul had in verses 9 and 10 in order to have a conversation about the power, role and effect of Bible preaching and teaching in the life and mission of the church.

Hear now the Word of the Lord:

1 After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. 2 And he 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, 3 and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade. 4 And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks. 5 When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. 6 And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.” 7 And he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. His house was next door to the synagogue. 8 Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized. 9 And the Lord said to Paul

one night in a vision, “Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, 10 for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.” 11 And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

12 But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal, 13 saying, “This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law.” 14 But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, “If it were a matter of wrongdoing or vicious crime, O Jews, I would have reason to accept your complaint. 15 But since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves. I refuse to be a judge of these things.” 16 And he drove them from the tribunal. 17 And they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of this. (Acts 18:1-17 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

As I mentioned, I want to use the vision recorded in verses 9-10 as a lens through which to consider this story – and the Corinthians correspondence as a whole. Paul got off to a very rocky start in the city of Corinth. The Jews in that city were offended by Paul’s preaching and they kicked him out of the synagogue almost immediately. To make matters worse – at least from their perspective – Paul had apparently converted their synagogue leader and he LEFT WITH PAUL and helped to plant the church in the house NEXT DOOR!

As you can well imagine, people were very upset about these developments. Accusations were flying, threats were made, and so Paul thought that perhaps it was time to go, but the Lord came to him in a vision and said: “No! I don’t want to leave. I will protect you and I want you to keep on preaching:

“for I have many in this city who are my people.” (Acts 18:10 ESV)

I think that is one of the most interesting lines in the entire Bible.

I have many people in this city.

“Well then why is everyone in this city trying to kill me?”

I imagine that was Paul's question. "Why is the city rioting? Why did I get kicked out of the synagogue? If you have many people in this city, then WHERE ARE THEY ARE, Lord?"

And the answer is: they haven't been called out yet. They haven't been awakened and gathered by the Word of God! That's what I want to focus in on this morning, because the Word of God DOES IT ALL in this story.

You probably remember that famous quote from Martin Luther about the Word of God doing it all during the time of the Protestant Reformation.

"Take me, for example. I opposed indulgences and all papists, but never by force. I simply taught, preached, wrote God's Word: otherwise I did nothing. And then, while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that never a prince or emperor did such damage to it. I did nothing: the Word did it all¹."

I'm not sure you want to put that on your pastoral resume: "I preach and drink beer; that's me in a nutshell" – but the point Luther is making is that the WORD OF GOD is the POWER and FORCE of ALL REFORMATION, REVIVAL and CHANGE. That was true in 16th century Europe and that was true in 1st Century Roman Corinth – so let's take a look at that. In this story we see the Word of God doing 3 very important things. We see first of all that:

1. The Word of God SAVES

Look at verse 8. Luke says:

"And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized." (Acts 18:8 ESV)

In the Greek those verbs are in the imperfect tense so they have a continuous tense. Luke is saying that this WAS HAPPENING on an ongoing basis. People were hearing the Word preached by Paul and were believing it and being baptized into the family of God – praise the Lord!

¹ Luther's Works. See quoted at http://www.reformationtheology.com/2009/03/the_word_did_it_all_martin_lut.php

Now, you might say, “Wait a second Pastor, only JESUS SAVES.” And I want to agree with that. I’m not saying that the Bible died on the cross and rose again from the dead for our salvation. Jesus did that. The Word of God in the flesh did that – but we can only KNOW ABOUT THAT through the Word of God PREACHED.

According to the Bible HEARING the Word of God is NECESSARY to the process of salvation. The Apostle Paul says that in Romans 10:17:

“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” (Romans 10:17 ESV)

People have to hear the “word of Christ” in order to be saved. That phrase “the word of Christ” is a shorthand way of saying that people have to hear the Bible preached in such a way that it LANDS ON and CLIMAXES in the person and work of Christ. They have to hear Christ centred Bible preaching. When the Christ of Scripture is presented to them through reading and teaching the BIBLE – that creates the conditions in which people may manifest FAITH and so be SAVED.

Now, this isn’t something the Apostle Paul invented; this goes all the way back to Jesus – in fact the words that Jesus uses in this visionary appearance in verses 9-10 intentionally reference something he said to the disciples back in John 10. Let me repeat what Jesus said in the vision so that you can spot the reference. In the vision here in verses 9-10 he says:

“Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.” (Acts 18:9-10 ESV)

Alright, so don’t leave, don’t stop preaching, for I have many in this city who are my people”.

Now compare that to what Jesus said to the disciples in John 10:16. He said:

“I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.” (John 10:16 ESV)

So there Jesus says to the disciples that his flock is much bigger than they imagine it to be. They think that it is just the Jews that Jesus has come to call, and Jesus says, no, no, I have **MANY MORE PEOPLE THAN THAT**. I must bring them also and they will **LISTEN TO MY VOICE**.

Do you see the connection here?

Jesus is saying to Paul that some of his **MANY SHEEP** are in fact living in Corinth and they need to be called out by **HIS VOICE** speaking through Paul's preaching of the Word!

It is so important for us to understand this!!

Every time we open our mouths to teach the Bible such that it lands on the person and work of Jesus – every time we tell the Gospel story from the pages of Holy Scripture it **PROJECTS THE VOICE AND CALL OF CHRIST!** And that's like a **DOG WHISTLE!** The voice of Christ, carried inside that preaching and teaching is a **DOG WHISTLE** that will awaken, stir, call and collect all those whose hearts have been prepared by the Master. That's what Jesus said:

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.” (John 10:27 ESV)

I'm like a shepherd, Jesus says. I walk into the community pen and I whistle and my sheep hear my voice and they form a line and follow me **OUT** into green pastures.

That's what preaching does. That's what Bible teaching does. That's what you reading the Bible with an unsaved friend does: **IT PROJECTS THE VOICE AND CALL OF JESUS**.

And when that happens, all over the herd and masses of sheep - ears are going to perk up. Folks are going to stand up and get in line and begin to follow you out and onwards toward the Master.

And that's why the teaching and preaching of the Word of God is **CENTRAL** to everything we do here as a church. When we do VBS we get the bouncy tents, we get the snow cone machine, we get the craft lady, we get the reptile guy, we go on the trips – yes, yes and yes – but we do all of that so that we can get 100 kids into a room to **HEAR** and **ATTEND TO** the **WORD OF THE LORD!** That's what it is all about!

We do the exact same thing at the Men's Retreat. We do the axe throwing and the bar-b-q and the buffalo wings – we get the skit guys and the stupid jokes and the goofy prizes – all so as to gather a 100 men in a room where they can HEAR and POTENTIALLY RESPOND TO the VOICE AND CALL OF JESUS CARRIED INSIDE THE WORD OF GOD PREACHED.

It's not rocket science!

The Word of God is powerful – and when it washes over a crowd EARS PERK UP, HEARTS ARE STRANGELY WARMED. THE TOMBES OPEN. DEAD PEOPLE COME FORTH AND ARE RAISED TO LIFE – praise the Lord!

And yet, as wonderful as that is, it does raise a question, because it sounds like Jesus already KNEW who was going to respond to Paul's preaching and who wasn't. He says that there are many in this city who are my people – it sounds like he knows who they are, and of course, that sounds very similar to what Luke said earlier in Acts 13:48:

“And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and **as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.**” (Acts 13:48 ESV)

Which again RAISES THE QUESTION: how does one get appointed for eternal life? How does one get to be one of those people who hear the Word of God and believe?

Now, I confess that I don't know as much as I'd like to know about this process. There is mystery here. We only know what the Bible tells us. The Bible says that no human being, after the fall, is inclined to hear and respond to the Word of the Lord. In Romans 1:18 Paul says that human beings in their natural, fallen state:

“suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (Romans 1:18 NASB)

So we don't hear because we don't WANT TO HEAR. Human beings have been sticking their fingers in their ears for so long that we have permanently PLUGGED that hole. And so now we can't hear.

But, as this story makes clear, obviously, some people do hear. The whistle is blown and EARS PERK UP and PEOPLE ARE SAVED – that’s the whole point of the story! So how did these people get there?

And the answer is: by the grace and mercy of God.

Old Testament and New – that fact is acknowledged. David in Psalm 40 says:

“In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted, but **you have given me an open ear.**” (Psalm 40:6 ESV)

It wasn’t ultimately my sacrifices and my offerings you wanted, it was my LISTENING – and so you GAVE ME an open ear.

That’s grace.

And it was the same for Peter. When he made his big declaration in Matthew 16 – being the first of the disciples to figure out that Jesus was the Christ, the Lord said to him:

“Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 16:17 ESV)

BLESSED ARE YOU, he says, not SMARTEST ARE YOU. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.

Jesus says to Peter: “the fact that you have heard the dog whistle and have stood up and begun to come forth means that you are blessed! God has given grace to you. He has given you an open ear.”

So – Old Testament and New, GRACE COMES FIRST. God has to go through the sheepfold and open some ears. He’s got to do some surgery. He has to remove some clogs. He has to DIG SOME HOLES. And then when the Word of God is preached - when the whistle is blown – some people are going to hear and those people are going to come forth.

But how do you get to be one of those people?

That I do not know.

The Bible tells us all kinds of things that are not factors. In Romans 9 Paul says it has nothing to do with race or social standing or wealth or righteousness. It's none of those things – but then he doesn't tell us what it is. He just says that there is no injustice on God's part:

For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” 16 So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. (Romans 9:15-16 ESV)

So we can't know, we don't know – we just know that it begins with the mercy and compassion of God. But we also know that people are responsible for whether they listen or not. After all, you are the one who stuck his fingers in his ears. You are the one who was so committed to NOT hearing the Word of God that you ruptured your ear drums sticking those fingers in there as deep as they would go – so that's on you.

Human beings are morally responsible – but they need help and mercy from God in order to hear – so what that says to me is that if you are here today and you haven't heard the voice and call of Christ yet, but you would like to, then you ought to pray for God to have mercy on your soul and you ought to ask him to do a miracle in your ear.

Ask him – right now – take a break from listening to me – and ask God to do surgery on your ears. Say: “God, I'd like to hear the voice and call of Jesus inside the words of this human preacher. Please open my ears and soften my heart to receive.”

Do that and you might find the rest of this sermon miraculously interesting.

Alright, so the Word of God SAVES – praise the Lord! But what if you are already saved? What about all the Corinthians who heard the Word of God and believed – why did they need to hear more Bible preaching and teaching? And the answer is because:

2. The Word of God SANCTIFIES

We'll move quicker here – the first point is the MAIN POINT, but there are two other things I want you to see. When we read the Bible we see that the Word of God SAVES and the Word of God SANCTIFIES. Of course, that too, goes all the way back to Jesus. Jesus in his prayer for all those who would believe in him in John 17 says:

“Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.” (John 17:17 ESV)

So when the Word of God washes over a group like this one, TWO THINGS are happening simultaneously: some people are hearing the voice and call of Jesus for the first time. They're waking up like dead people in the tombs. Everything is dark. They are all tangled up in stuff, but immediately they begin the process of unwrapping and stepping out.

Praise the Lord!

But other people who did all of that years and maybe even decades ago – they are hearing the Word of God and being CHANGED. Paul says that TO THESE CORINTHIANS in 2 Corinthians 3:18. He says:

“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” (2 Corinthians 3:18 ESV)

That is SUCH AN INCREDIBLE PASSAGE! I love what Mark Seifrid says about it in his commentary, he says:

“The Lord wills to speak with us face-to-face, as he did with Moses. It is this relationship of communication and giving, in which the gift is the Giver himself, that constitutes our salvation.”²

So, just like Moses went into the Tent of Meeting to talk to God – and then his face was all– so too Jesus wants to talk to us – face to face, as it were – which he does INSIDE the Word of God preached. That is salvation! Salvation is being back in the place where we can speak to God face to face – as we did back in the beginning when we walked with God in the cool of evening

² Mark A. Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 187.

breezes. That's what happens now when we HEAR the voice of Jesus inside of Bible preaching and teaching. That's why Hebrews 4:12 says:

“the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” (Hebrews 4:12 ESV)

So this conversation we have with Jesus is a DEEP and PENETRATING conversation. In it he shows us things that need to change and he gives us the power to make those changes. All of that happens INSIDE the Word of God preached; when the Word washes over you and the Spirit begins to speak inside you – do you know that dynamic?

That's why as a preacher I don't worry too much whether or not people can regurgitate all 3 or 4 of my points in the car on the way home after the sermon. The goal is not for you to memorize my outline – the goal is for you to HEAR THE VOICE OF JESUS inside this sermon. So, if you are listening, and then all of the sudden the Spirit starts speaking inside of you – feel free to check out from me in order to carry on that dialogue. Maybe the Spirit has just one thing to say to you today – and it comes out of the first point. But for the person beside you, it's coming out of the second point or the third point. It doesn't matter. What matters is whether you met Jesus.

Did you have an appointment with Jesus today in the preaching and hearing of God's Word? If you did – then you will be changed. By one degree of glory to the next – thanks be to God!

Now, I want you to see one more. The Word of God saves us, the Word of God sanctifies us and the Word of God separates us.

3. The Word of God SEPARATES

That's part of this story too. Look at verses 5-6:

Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. 6 And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.” (Acts 18:5-6 ESV)

Shaking out his garment was a symbolic way of saying: “You people are no longer part of the family of God. When you reject God’s Word you place yourself outside – it doesn’t matter whether you are Jewish, Gentile, American or Canadian. Refusing to hear is choosing NOT TO BELONG.”

And so that’s why the Word of God CREATES NEW COMMUNITY because HEARING THE WORD OF GOD separates us from our OLD COMMUNITY – as it does here in this story. The Word of God SPLIT this synagogue and eventually this whole city.

That’s what it does.

The Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the DIVISION OF SOUL AND SPIRIT – not to mention synagogue and city – so the more you hear of it, the more you are going to look like an alien and maybe even an enemy to your friends and neighbours, and therefore the more you are going to need the friendship and support of the people sitting next to you here in this place – thanks be to God.

Let me pray for us.