

Lesson 12: Preaching Christ in the City of Sin (Acts 18:1-11)

Telling the Story (Evangelism in the Early Church)

Maurice W. Lusk, III

Paul goes from the synagogue in Thessalonica to the Aareopagas in Athens. He then made his way to one of the most infamous cities of the Mediterranean world. Luke-Timothy Johnson, professor of NT at Emory University, gives the following description of Corinth.

As a port city, it was a bustling center of trade and commerce, with a large transient population, a reputation for sexual immorality, and a variety of religious cults, including (as archaeologists have uncovered), a “Synagogue of the Hebrews,” a temple to Apollo, and an Isis Shrine, as well as the famous temple to Aphrodite (the goddess of sensual love) on the **Acrocorinth** (Luke Timothy Johnson, *Acts of the Apostles*, p 322).

A City Renowned for its Fornication (18:1-3)

After these things he departed from Athens, and came to Corinth. 2 And he found a certain Jew named Aquila, a man of Pontus by race, (lately come from Italy, with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome); and he approached them; 3 and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together, by trade they were tentmakers (skēnōpíōs - to make tents, an old word meaning to work with leather).

Corinth was one of the major cities of Greece, and where Athens was renowned as the home of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle,

Corinth, was renowned for its fornication. The Greek word for fornication is *pornos*, meaning to engage in sexual immorality. The word for a prostitute is *porneia*. This is the word from which the English word pornography - writing about fornication - derives. It was the Sodom and Gomorrah of the first century world. To be called "a Corinthian" often meant a "whoremonger," a person buys sex from prostitutes, or one characterized by sexual Immorality. Fornication (*porneia*) is found in the NT in 26 occurrences as something condemned by God and denounced by Jesus in numerous texts: Matt 15:17-21, Mark 7:20-23. The culture of a greater part of the planet earth is similar to Corinth in that celebrates sexual behavior an a variety of forms and relationships.

Corinth played a major role in the shipping industry and provided the men of the sea with wine, women, and song when they were in port. As mentioned in Dr Johnson's quote above, one of Corinth's most famous mythological deities was the goddesses Aphrodite, whose temple was served by more than a hundred sacred priestesses (*hieriai*), with whom men could engage in fornication in the name of the goddess Aphrodite. William Barclay's description of the moral culture of Corinth is found in many commentaries on the Corinthian letters; his comments are given here:

The very word *korinthiazesthai*, to live like a Corinthian, had become a part of the Greek language, and meant to live with drunken and immoral debauchery ... Aelian, the late Greek writer, tells us that if ever a Corinthian was shown upon the stage in a Greek play he was shown drunk. The very name Corinth was synonymous with debauchery and there was one source of evil in the city, which was known all over the civilized world. Above the isthmus towered the hill of the Acropolis, and on it stood the great temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. To that temple there were attached one thousand priestesses who were sacred prostitutes, and in the evenings they descended from the Acropolis and plied their trade upon the streets of Corinth, until it became a Greek proverb, 'It is not every man who can afford a journey to Corinth.' In addition to these cruder

sins, there flourished far more recondite vices, which had come in with the traders and the sailors from the ends of the earth, until Corinth became not only a synonym for wealth and luxury, drunkenness and debauchery, but also for filth." (William Barclay, *The Letters To The Corinthians*, p 2-3).

This tells us much about Paul's concern over *poineia* (fornication) in his first letter to the Christians (1 Cor. 5:1, 9-11; 6:9-20; 10:8).

Reasoning in the Synagogue, Again! (18:4-5)

And he was reasoning (dialegomai - to reason, engage in argumentation) in the synagogue every Sabbath, and he was persuading (peitho - root word for pisteuo, believe) Jews and Greeks. 5 But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul was seized (sunecho - to be seized, taken hold of) by the word, testifying (diamartureo) to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah/Christ.

In the midst of this culture was a synagogue of Hellenistic Jews. Paul met two of them, Aquila and Priscilla, messianic Jews from Rome who had been expelled from Rome by the Roman emperor Claudius in 49 AD. Paul most likely met them in the *Agora* or marketplace, where they were making and selling tents. Paul was a tentmaker or leather craftsman as well and joined them in their business. They also took him to the synagogue there in Corinth where he managed to find a way of making know to the assembly that the Messiah had come to Israel in fulfillment of the Scriptures.

The text says that he was reasoning (*dialegomai* - dialogue, presenting argumentation, to reason with). So, Paul was in the synagogue doing what he always did, he continued to declare to the Hellenistic Jews of the Diaspora that a man from Nazareth in the homeland of Israel was believed to be the Messiah.

Luke tells us that Paul was persuading both Jews and Greeks; so, Paul was converting some of the Diaspora Jews and some of the

godfearers. Paul intensified his preaching of the word when Silas and Timothy joined him in Corinth informing Paul that many of the Christians of Thessalonica were falling away because the eschatological event of the return of Jesus had not occurred. Sometime during his stay in Corinth Paul respond to this crisis with a letter addressing the issue of the return of Christ (I Thessalonians), which was carried back to Thessalonica by a disciple named Tychicus, accompanied by Onesimus (1 Thess 4:7-9).

From the House of Scrolls to the House of Titus (18:6-7)

*And when they opposed Paul and blasphemed [the name of Jesus?], he shook out his garment and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads; I am clean, from now on I will go to the Gentiles." 7 And leaving there he entered into the house of a certain man named Titus Justus, one that worshipped God (*sebomai* – to show reverence for), whose house was next door to the synagogue.*

There is a question about the correct manuscript reading here in these verses. The Western Text called *Textus Receptus* (from which the KJV translation was done), gives a longer reading than the United Bible Society text *Novum Testamentum Graece* edited by Kurt Aland, Matthew Black, and Bruce Metzger (based on additional and older manuscripts). The *Textus Receptus* reads, "after much speech and interpretation of Scripture they took opposition to Paul and blasphemed [cursed the name of] Jesus." The additional reading in this text was probably added by a scribe who thought the older reading was ambiguous so he added more text to make it more understandable; this often happens in manuscripts that are newer than the older texts such as *Codex Sinaiticus*, *Codex Alexandrinus*, or *Codex Vaticanus*. This reading gives us more detail as to what caused those of the synagogue to oppose Paul. It was his interpretation of the messianic text he quotes in his speeches in Acts and his letters. The action of shaking the dust off his shoes or outer garment was a traditional way of breaking fellowship with another Jew. This was taught by Jesus (Luke 10:11ff) and was practiced by the apostles (Acts 13:49-51).

The statement, “your blood be on your own heads, I am clean,” has reference to the watchman text of Ezekiel 3:17-21; 33:1-9 (see also Acts 20:25-31). The precedent for this is found in 2 Sam 1:76 and 2 Kings 2:33; 3:1. Paul’s words, “I will go to the gentiles,” is most likely the godfearers of the synagogue who did believe his witness to the messiahship of Jesus.

Whether the person mentioned in verse 7 is the Titus of Paul’s companionship is not known. The location was most likely a courtyard connected between two or more houses. The larger homes in this culture did have large walled courtyards surrounded by several houses of the same family. Such a place would have been ideal for Paul’s lectures and discussions, as was the case with Socrates, who did most of his teaching in the open air of Athens. There are numerous references to Titus in Paul’s letters (cf. 2 Cor 2:6, 13; 8:6, 16-24; 12:18; Gal 2:1; 2 Timothy 4:10; Titus 1:4). However, the fact that Paul mentions Titus in Gal 2:1, and states that he was with him when he went to Jerusalem with Barnabas in the forties, makes it unlikely that the Titus of Acts 18 was the same Titus associated with Paul’s mission team. Titus Justice was most likely a godfearer, one who was wealthy enough to have a large villa with a walled courtyard or something of this nature.

Many Corinthians Believe and Are Baptized (18:8-10)

And Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his house; and many of the Corinthians hearing were believing, and were being baptized. 9 And the Lord said to Paul in a night vision, Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent 10 for I am with you and no one will assault you, to do evil to you, for to me there are many people in this city.

Here we have the first evidence of Paul converting a member of the Jewish hierarchy, an *archisunagogos* – “ruler of the synagogue,” by the name of Crispus, who was personally baptized by Paul (1 Cor 1:14). Many Corinthians were receiving Paul’s words and were being baptized (present tense - ongoing or continuous action); so, from the

way the text reads, there was a good bit of continuous action going on in the house of Titus Justice in the conversion of many Greeks to the faith.

Paul's night vision is significant. Much of the revelation God sends into the world comes in the form of dreams and visions. The night vision was the most common to the prophets of old (Gen 20:3; 26:24; 31:24; 40:50; 41:11; 46:2; Isaiah 26:9; 29:7; Zech 1:8ff). The most familiar examples of this are the night visions of Daniel in Daniel 2:19; 7:2, 7, 13-14; see also Zech 1:8ff. Most of Jesus' prayers were offered during the night (Luke 2:8; 6:12; 21:37), and what he received during the night from God can only be imagined. It was in a dream that Joseph was told that Mary's child was from God (Matt 1:18-21); the warning to the wise men came in the night (Matt 2:12). In Acts Paul was delivered from prison by an angel at night (Acts 5:19; Paul received a night vision in Acts 16:9; and here in 18:9 he receives a night vision in which the Lord revealed to him direction concerning his mission.

A Sitting Rabbi (18:11)

And he sat (kathizo - to take a seat, to assume a seated position) among them for a year and six months, teaching among them the word of God.

The traditional position of a teacher in the first century Mediterranean culture was that of sitting in the midst of his students. In western culture the teacher stands before his class or behind a lectern to address his or her class, with exception of a seminar or colloquy with a discussion format, which allows the teacher to teach by asking questions, a style used by the Greek teachers as well as Jewish rabbis. In the culture of Paul the teacher, whether a *rabbi* or a Greek *didaskalos*, sat slightly elevated above the students who sat below him on the floor. To say, as Luke does here, that Paul sat among them suggests that Paul was assuming the role of a *rabbi* or *didaskalos* with those who wished to hear him encircling him. In the synagogue, however, the speaker would only stand when reading Scripture; he would then sit to comment on the text. In Jesus' reading

of Isaiah in the synagogue of Nazareth (Luke 4:16-22), he stood while reading, then rolled up the scroll, gave it to the attendant, then sat down and commented on the text read. In study sessions in the synagogue the format would have been an open discussion with all males assuming an equal position.

We need to remember that Paul was a *rabbi*, a *talmid* schooled at the feet of Gamaliel I, and was a *rabbi* of significant standing according to Gal 1:13-14; Acts 5:33-40 and 22:3. Talmudic tradition also attributes to him a role of very high standing during the first century. For Paul to have learners sit at his feet as *talmidim* to a *rabbi*, recalls the incident of Mary who sat at the feet of Jesus with his male disciples or *talmidim* (Luke 10:41-42). Paul was in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching the godfearers who left the synagogues to hear about a religion whose long awaited deliverer had come, with possibly some Hellenistic Jews, as well as Greeks who would have been brought to listen to Paul as he lectured and held discussions in the house of Titus Justice concerning this one who was the savior of the world.

Application

Something other than pagan myth was being presented to the people of Corinth. The statues and shrines to the gods and goddesses of paganism were seen everywhere. Their deity figures were portrayed in myths as sexually promiscuous and often intoxicated from the offerings they received from the productive winemakers of the Greece. In fact, there was a god of wine (Bacchus) and a god of drunken revelry (Dionysus), whose worship consisted of intoxicated revelry.

But the most prominent deities of the Corinthian culture were the goddesses; especially, the goddesses who were believed to be capable of giving her worshippers what they most wanted: the necessities of life in terms of food, shelter, and fertility in crops, livestock, and sons. Those desires associated with the lust of the flesh, the desires of the eyes, and the pride of life (1 John 2:15-17)

were among the benefits most desired by the devotees of these pagan goddesses.

The question confronting us here is whether we can see ancient Corinth in our 21st century culture. Since 80% of the American people have claimed in surveys to be Christians, one would expect a negative answer. However, if what we see and hear, what people profess to believe in their thinking and act out in their behavior in our culture is any indication, then the answer is a strong “yes,” we can see Corinth virtually everywhere we look in our culture; especially in the entertainment media.

The idolatry of our culture takes a different form than can be seen in ancient Corinth. It is not stone statues or shrines we worship; rather, it is what these statues and shrines represented that is still alive and well in the world in which we live. Jesus spoke of the love of Mammon (wealth) as an expression of idolatry, and this form of idolatry is the driving force of our capitalistic culture. Sexual passion or erotica is close behind wealth as an obsession of our culture. The human female body is a virtual object of devotion to millions of the people of most of the cultures of this planet. The display of nudity appears to be a right everyone wishes to claim. There appears to be little or no concern for this malignancy in our culture, both the right to display their nakedness and to view it in every possible way. Raising a question of moral behavior can always be a discussion starter in any evangelistic endeavor.

Paul speaks of those who glory in their shame in Phil 3:19, and John, in the book of Revelation, speaks of people of Laodicea whose repentance must be to cover their nakedness (3:18) and in 16:15, of the exposure of one's nakedness as a shame. “Fornication” is considered an outdated biblical word that has neither meaning nor application when used to describe the behavior of unmarried people engaging in sexual intercourse. All sexual activity occurring outside the marriage of a man and woman is defined by the word *porneia* (fornication), in the teaching of Jesus, the apostles, and other NT writers.

How does this relate to a study of the “evangelism of the early church?” In a city such as Corinth; in fact, in most cities of the Greco-Roman world, a discussion of moral behavior was an issue of great interest to people who did not wish to participate in such behavior, nor wanted their children exposed to this kind of behavior.

It is evident from Paul’s letters that this was an issue in the conversion of many of the people of these pagan cultures. In Gal 4:8-9; 5:16-26; Eph 2:1-5; and Col 3:1-17, Paul addresses the former immorality these converts had been involved in and contrasts them to the demands of life as new creations in Christ.

The question of how one feels about the moral standards of our culture may quickly open the door to a discussion of how one determines what is moral and what is not, and how belief in and imitation of Christ is the most successful way of finding a way of life that delivers one from the moral issues of our culture. The issue of holy living must have been an essential part of Paul’s preaching of Christ. He clearly informed those desiring to become followers of Christ of what was required of one, morally speaking, to be holy (a saint) in Christ; especially, since he reminded them in his letters of their former ways of life and how they had turned from that life to become followers of Christ.

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