

Acts 18 vs 1-22 Taking the city for God

Introduction

On Sunday 14 November 2010 Ferrari driver Fernando Alonso entered the final race of the Formula One season leading the championship table. Although theoretically there were three other drivers, Sebastian Vettel and Mark Webber from Red Bull Racing and McLaren driver Lewis Hamilton, that could win the race, it was his to lose. He needed to finish only in fourth place to secure another championship title. Alonso finished seventh at the chequered flag, at the end of possibly the most competitive season in that sport for years. What was it that went wrong on the day? It was nothing to do with the driver whose actions in the race were good. The mistakes were made by members of his Ferrari team in the garage. For the technically minded it was the team decision to call Alonso in for new prime tyres in order to cover title rival Mark Weber and the consequent problem of him coming back into the race lower down the field and eventually getting stuck behind the car of Renault driver Vitaly Petrov for the rest of the race. Ferrari team principal Stefano Domenicali admitted that his team had made a mistake and their wrong choice had cost Alonso the title on the day. [Ferrari: 'Alonso strategy a team decision' Jonathan Noble Autosport.com 14 Nov 2010] Most of us will not be particularly interested in that sport, but the principles behind what happened on 14 November 2010 are applicable to a wide variety of situations, including our work together for God. Had Alonso won the title there would have been little chance of reporters interviewing the majority of the backroom staff in the Ferrari garage; the focus would have been on the wonderful driver who was now receiving the acclaim for his magnificent driving. Yet each person had a vital role to play in the team supporting their man and his success or lack of it was shared with them. In so many life situations one or two people are the public face of a school or an office or company, for example, yet although the team leaders are entitled to their fair share of the credit for work accomplished, the success of the task undertaken requires the best efforts of all the other members of the team to make it possible. In our Western cultures the media focus is often on the individual 'stars' with inadequate attention to the other people who have contributed to that success. Yet this too often is unbalanced and as Christians we can set a good example in honouring and affirming each person's contribution in our place of work; in our family circles and in our church family. Let us think about people we may not have expressed appreciation to, for the work they do in one of the many ministries of the church, and thank them for it. The success in God's work in this church over recent years, in part, is down to so many people being willing to make available their skills and time to serve – I hope that each one of us asks the question, if we are not already active in some church ministry – Lord where can I use my gifts in this church and how can I best honour You in this work?

1. The necessity of teamwork (Acts 18:1-3,5a)

After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth.² There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them³ and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them...⁵ When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching... A closer look at the New Testament church than is often given, reveals that a far greater number of men and women and young people played their part in the spread of the Christian Church in those early years. It is understandable to concentrate on Paul, Barnabas, Peter or James, four of the great leaders, yet they made a point of working

with colleagues and inviting others to join them in their missionary journeys. Here in these opening verses of chapter eighteen four of Paul's colleagues in ministry were named. All of them were church-planters, Aquila and his wife Priscilla, together with Silas and Timothy. There was a degree of informality concerning the team structures as is revealed in verse two. Aquila and Priscilla had to leave the newly formed congregation in Rome (where neither Paul nor Peter had visited at that stage), due to persecution of Jews and Christians (of whom a significant proportion were ethnically Jewish), following an edict issued by the Emperor Claudius. What was happening in Rome that caused this crisis? Roman historian Suetonius, in his *Life of Claudius*, wrote: 'as the Jews were making constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he banished them from Rome.' We need to understand that Christianity was considered a branch of Judaism at that time and the Roman authorities assumed that all Christians were Jews. Suetonius mis-spells 'Christ', but it is clear that there were at least heated arguments in the Jewish community at that time concerning the claims of Jesus, and severe enough to come to the attention of the authorities regarding a breach of the peace. Could the small native Gentile church survive when its Jewish leaders and many members had been forced to leave the city? Yes it could! What is more a well-planted church with native leadership will normally grow faster than an equivalent one planted by an equally gifted missionary. On the surface it appeared a tragedy with greatly reduced numbers at Sunday services, but the long-term impact was probably for the good of that church. Later myths about Peter or Paul leading that church have obscured the crucial role played by ordinary unknown local believers who helped that church to grow so impressively in the next few decades. This is not an isolated phenomenon. In 1949 the Communist government expelled the foreign missionaries that had done such a great work in China over more than a century. The one million believers were required by necessity to take care of themselves. Many churches were forcibly closed; members had to meet in a variety of home-based locations in different parts of the towns or cities of that country. It turned out to be a successful mission strategy as the church in China today numbers around 100 million people! Praise God that adversity can result in long-term blessing, despite short-term hardship or even severe trials. Aquila and Priscilla were the ideal people to assist Paul in planting a new church in Corinth. They would have been happy to stay in Rome, yet God overruled the persecution in Rome in order that a key couple might help a church get started in this tough Greek city, amongst other things.

What Claudius had done was out of order and unfair, yet out of the mess of this situation God would bring something to pass in Corinth for good. In our lives we can experience unfairness in many situations; workplace issues, for example, where someone whose friendship with a more senior staff member gets them promoted ahead of a better qualified colleague, or lesser irritating issues might be better choices of time off for holidays or some other perks of the job, at the expense of other employees. Family issues of relationship conflict or actual breakdown; defaulting customers of a company who you suspect never had any intention of paying their bills, but whose actions can result in employees being made redundant or even the demise of a whole company; so many situations in which potential injustice seems to take place without redress. However, as Christians while acknowledging that human beings through their wrong choices can cause such grief and suffering to other people, we believe that there is no situation in which God cannot work and out of which there can be no redemptive blessings. An extreme example is the defining event of the violent and brutal twentieth century, the holocaust, in which over six million Jews and a minority of other people were slaughtered. Out of it within Europe came a concern for genuine human rights for each citizen, even if that legislation was later twisted to affect situations for which its founders had never intended it to be involved. Out of this tragedy came the founding of the

modern state of Israel in 1948. In any other decade in the twentieth century, other than the one after World War II, this vote would have been vetoed by at least one of the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. Yet God's hand was on this event, an extraordinary development of a people returning to their land, 2,000 years after their eviction from it. There were no parallels in human history. The teamwork of this small group of Jews led to the defeat of the armies of the surrounding Muslim Arab nations that had planned to drive them into the sea, or slaughter them, as the Turks had done with Armenian and Greek Christians more than thirty years earlier.

The small group of Christian pioneers went out church-planting in teams. Certainly Paul and Barnabas, and possibly Silas and Timothy were single men freed from family responsibilities to work away from home for extended periods of time. A fair number of Christian women and men in later centuries also made that choice so that their mobility as missionaries would not be hindered by family responsibilities. There have always been missionary couples or missionary families on the field, but there are some situations where that has been seen as less advisable over the years. What has been essential, though, in such situations is teamwork; colleagues supporting one another to endure the pressures and trials that can arise when serving the Lord in difficult or hostile places.

2. The challenge of rejection (Acts 18:4-6)

⁴ *Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.* ⁵ *When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.* ⁶ *But when the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.* None of us like to be rejected or feel unwanted. It's a natural part of being human to want to be loved and welcomed and included as appropriate in whatever circles we are mixing at the time. Yet all of us have to handle rejection in a variety of ways. For our young people applying for college or university there are more potential students than places, especially on the most popular courses. This is often the first serious form of rejection which can be difficult to handle; especially in times of economic decline we need to pray for wisdom for our young people as they seek to discern God's will for their lives and the potential career they may be trained for. In the job market we may make an application and even get as far as an interview, but only one person can get the post for which potentially a good number of people may have applied. When this is a repeated experience many times over it can become demoralising. For others in a variety of relational contexts there can be deep hurts as a result of things going wrong; sadly, it can also happen in a church context far too often. The difficulties that arise sometimes as a result of a rejection by unbelievers are no surprise, but what is hardest to accept is ungodly conduct by Christians amongst some of their brothers and sisters in Christ. However, we are all flawed and imperfect human beings who make mistakes and as a result need in a Christ-like way at times to offer or to receive apologies within the church family, as Jesus would have us do.

We can have the impression from the New Testament that Paul was really tough, able to handle everything that was thrown at him and get up again, but that would not be the whole picture. In his first letter to the Corinthians he makes an autobiographical comment on how he felt about starting a work in Corinth. *When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God* ² *For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.* ³ *I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling.* ⁴ *My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's*

power (I Corinthians 2:1-4). Have you ever pictured the apostle so fearful of the enormity of his task that he was shaking with fear? This may have been in private rather than in public, but it was how he viewed the challenge facing him. How many of us can say truthfully that we have never had our difficult moments as well? I suspect almost all of us have been in this situation at one time or other. Corinth was a tough environment in which to plant a church. It was a proud cosmopolitan city that had been rebuilt by Julius Caesar in 46BC. It has an enviable cultural scene and was fanatical about its sports –all things that were foreign to Paul’s experience. It hosted the Isthmian games every two years which drew in the crowds to watch this spectacle. If that was not enough Corinth was also the capital city of the province of Achaia, taking precedence even over Athens. Yet Corinth was known for its sexual promiscuity. Every vice and depravity available was openly available in that city. How can a Christian be an effective witness in a city like that? Paul certainly was thinking along those lines. To make matters worse he did not fare very well in the synagogue. A large majority of the Jewish men not only disagreed with his views about Jesus, but were verbally abusive and dismissive of him. Acts 19:6 recorded details of that encounter: *But when the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.* What is the significance of these actions by Paul? We need to look back in the Old Testament for guidance. In Ezekiel 3:17-19 was a blunt message from God to the prophet Ezekiel about his responsibilities as a believer to people outside the faith: *Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. ¹⁸ When I say to a wicked man, 'You will surely die,' and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. ¹⁹ But if you do warn the wicked man and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his evil ways, he will die for his sin; but you will have saved yourself.* These are challenging words to us, but a reminder that people need to hear about Jesus and we are his mouthpiece and witnesses. They are similar words to those of Jesus to His disciples in Mark 6:11: *And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave, as a testimony against them.* This was a Jewish custom adapted by Jesus. The general custom of New Testament days in Israel was that a Jew who went outside the country carefully removed all dust and dirt from that other country before re-entering the ‘holy’ Promised Land. Jesus took this general custom and said to His followers, if a village where you go to preach about Me totally rejects you and the message you are bringing, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave, implying that the village is being regarded as a pagan one and that you have fulfilled your responsibility to proclaim the truth to them. Implicit in these words is the assumption that there will be a number of people who will totally reject the message we bring and possibly us with it –be prepared is the lesson for us!

3. The certainty of encouragement (Acts 18:7-11)

(a) **Human responses** (Acts 18:7-8) *Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshipper of God.⁸ Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptised.* Paul has been thinking I’m wasting my time here. No-one wants to know about Jesus. How wrong he was! It was not the outcome he had expected. Luke mentions two key people who came to faith during that time period. The first man Crispus was the senior elder in the synagogue. What a price he would pay for trusting in Jesus. His entire family group put their faith in Jesus, hallelujah! Yet it would be likely that he would lose his status in the synagogue and possibly friends and work as a result of his new-found faith. Within twenty-five years

followers of Jesus were excommunicated from the wider Jewish community and treated as if they did not exist. A young man I knew (later) as a 14 year-old professed faith in Christ in a Baptist youth group and was shown the door by his extremely strict Roman Catholic parents. He returned within hours to the pastor's home clutching all his worldly possessions, but determined to follow Jesus. There was a reconciliation with his parents some years later, but for me at the time it was a shocking thing that a person could be kicked out of their home for their faith in Jesus Christ. The call to follow Jesus is a huge step to make and can be a difficult road to travel. However, it is the way to go, in the footsteps of our Lord and master who says: 'Follow Me'. The second person was Titius Justus, a prominent Gentile, who was a wealthy Roman citizen who lived in the large house situated next door to the synagogue. He opened his home for meetings and would have had the space for a pretty large number of people to meet, as the church grew in the years to come. These first two prominent men and probably their families also were willing to count the cost and acknowledge Jesus before people. The consequence of their boldness? *Many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptised* (Acts 18:8b). Gentile Corinthians in significant numbers came to Christ, almost certainly after seeing Crispus and Titius Justus confess their faith in Christ. You never know who might be wanting to trust Jesus, but has been afraid to do so. Yet when you or someone else is open about your faith in the Lord, it may give them the courage to take a stand as well.

(b) **Divine resources** (Acts 17:9-11) *One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent.¹⁰ For I am with you, and no-one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.¹¹ So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.* Despite the very real blessings Paul was really fearful that he would get another beating and be expelled from the city. God gave him the reassurance he needed: *no-one is going to attack and harm you* (Acts 18:10). Paul had many short ministries before being chased out of town. However, God assured him that he would have a longer ministry in this large city, confirmed in verse 11. What was more exciting was God's amazing statement in v10b: *because I have many people in this city*. In effect God was saying: Paul persevere and continue in this city. I want to bless it and will do so through the transformed lives of those who profess faith in Me. Who knows what resources we need to live for God? He will supply all our needs. Praise God for that!

4. **The blessing of Roman vindication** (Acts 18:12-17)

¹² *While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him into court.* ¹³ *This man, they charged, is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law.* ¹⁴ *Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to the Jews, If you Jews were making a complaint about some misdemeanour or serious crime, it would be reasonable for me to listen to you.* ¹⁵ *But since it involves questions about words and names and your own law— settle the matter yourselves. I will not be a judge of such things.* ¹⁶ *So he had them ejected from the court.* ¹⁷ *Then they all turned on Sosthenes the synagogue ruler and beat him in front of the court. But Gallio showed no concern whatever.* Roman law allowed certain religions to be licensed. The Jews living in Corinth who were unconverted wanted Christianity banned and were prepared to go to court to press their case. Gallio, the proconsul, was less than thrilled by their behaviour and threw the case out of court, thus guaranteeing the freedom of religion, at that time in much of Greece. This was a critical case to win and Luke no doubt was making that point through the book of Acts. Evil people eventually overreach themselves and become vulnerable to being caught and forced to pay the penalty for their crimes. We must not rely totally on the State, as its morality and values change significantly over time. However, there may be ministries and local churches that choose to partner with the state, in order to get alongside people in need, in a particular setting. The coming of Bethany, the charity for homeless people, to Dundee this winter is a

good example of potential partnership not only with the city council, but also with a host of private agencies. All kinds of obstacles will cross our paths, but also opportunities. Sometimes the former may result in us taking opportunities that we might never have considered if our life's pathway had continued smoothly in a particular direction. In Corinth Paul was trusting God to a greater degree than in some other places because he felt his extreme weakness. Every Christian will have similar times when we feel totally inadequate in the light of a particular situation we cannot avoid. May we, like Paul, throw ourselves totally on the Lord to strengthen us to handle the situation to the best of our abilities. When the problems are large our joy is even greater when they are overcome, through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit within us. Our God is a God of pleasant surprises –maybe you have been blessed in recent weeks in some way –if so tell someone else so that they can rejoice with you.

5. The preparation for the future (Acts 18:18-22)

¹⁸ Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchrea because of a vow he had taken.¹⁹ They arrived at Ephesus, where Paul left Priscilla and Aquila. He himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews.²⁰ When they asked him to spend more time with them, he declined.²¹ But as he left, he promised, I will come back if it is God's will. Then he set sail from Ephesus.²² When he landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church and then went down to Antioch. The second missionary journey was coming to an end. Paul travels back to Antioch, visiting a number of churches along the way. This was a pleasant trip with friends and encouraging new congregations in the faith. It is most likely that his time was spent almost exclusively with fellow believers and his presence was unnoticed by the people who had made life so difficult for him when proclaiming the gospel as new churches were founded. His good friends Priscilla and Aquila chose to move on from Corinth and accompanied him, at least as far as Ephesus. Paul will take only a short break before setting off on another missionary journey, but rightly wants to report to his home church what the Lord has been doing through his ministry, for which they will have spent much time in prayer. This journey had taken them to places Paul and his companions had never expected to visit. His approach to evangelism had to be flexible to relate to very different kinds of people, both in terms of their cultural, religious and educational backgrounds. Most crucially Paul had a small team that accompanied him on his travels. Even big cities like Athens, and especially Corinth, where he feared making no impact for the Lord had visits that resulted in some people coming to Christ and forming a church. We too at a personal or church level can be afraid of taking big steps forward because we are not sure how things will turn out. May we like Paul and his companions pray hard to sense God's guidance and then go forward in faith, trusting Him to direct our paths, Amen.