

## Acts 18:23-19:10 Discipleship and Discernment

### Introduction

Why am I here? What are my priorities in 2011? What do I really want to achieve in the coming year or years? Many people are increasingly asking these kinds of questions in the Western world. The media message of more and more material consumption appears increasingly hollow and superficial and increasingly unattainable to a growing number of younger people who cannot find a suitable job. Last October I read an interesting article on an alternate approach to life entitled 'The Cult of Less' [*The Times Magazine* 30 October 2010] which attempted to articulate the philosophy of 'Generation Zero', a group of young, high-tech, highly mobile and connected people who are choosing to take a minimalist approach to possessions, so that they have the most tenuous connection to any particular geographical space. In the words of one British citizen of Chinese ancestry, Jennifer Dang (19): 'I had a lot of stuff I was attached to. But now because of minimalism, I can take my happiness with me wherever I go.' The typical minimalist is in their late-teens or twenties and comes from a prosperous middle-class background in the Anglo-Saxon world. I am not sure about the coherence of the group of people interviewed as to whether it is a social and cultural phenomenon that will be of major significance in the future, but I admire and accept their conviction that what is most important in life does not consist in the things we possess. However, given that the movement's members tend to be either single or childless couples it would be interesting to see how these values would be worked out in a family context. As followers of Jesus Christ our priorities will also (or should!) be different, in some respects, compared with the majority of people in the wider community. What priorities would Jesus make with respect to the decisions you may have to make in the first few weeks and months of this year? Paul in Romans 12:1-2 made the following statement: *Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God— this is your spiritual act of worship. <sup>2</sup> Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is— His good, pleasing and perfect will.* Notice Paul is not saying here is a list of new rules that should be followed in the next year to help you live for Jesus, rather he is asking these Romans Christians to seek God's wisdom and guidance that their thought patterns and values might be increasingly in line with biblical standards. Human nature is often inclined to taking the easy way and a works-based religion, a tick box mentality, sadly practiced in some churches, is much more amenable to sinful human nature. However, the godly way, God's way, is based on His grace, is worked out in relationship with Him and with other people, to their benefit and for His glory. I will gain the greatest fulfilment and sense of achievement in my life as a Christian, the more I hunger and thirst for the glory of God and the honouring of His name in my life. It will mean that my priorities may change; the things I am passionate about may become more or less significant when seen in the light of the glorious gospel I have been placed here on earth to proclaim through my life and through my words. How did these values affect Paul and his colleagues in Acts 18 and 19? Two key things stand out in our passage from Acts which are as important today in the twenty-first century as they were when first recorded by the great apostle.

## **1. Discipleship** (Acts 18:23-28)

(a) **Priority One – Disciples not converts** (Acts 18:23) <sup>23</sup> *After spending some time in Antioch, Paul set out from there and travelled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.* The Great Commission of Jesus in Matthew 28:19-20 was very plain about our calling: *Therefore go and make **disciples** of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and **teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.** And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.* The moment of conversion when we respond outwardly to the inward promptings of the Holy Spirit is but the launching pad for future growth in our relationship with the Lord Jesus and our understanding of God's Word which He has revealed to us. No-one has ever arrived spiritually this side of heaven. Perfection may be our goal but only in heaven will it be accomplished. In Romans 8:29 Paul stated that *For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son...* have you ever grasped the significance of those words? In heaven you will reflect Jesus because you will be perfect like Him in thought and word and deed. However, we will still be human beings - so His divine attributes and powers will separate us from Him, but we will be the kind of human beings God envisaged on the earth in a world without sin. Returning to our present situation we face the challenge of growing in grace and reflecting more of the principles and values which our Lord modelled so well in His life on earth. At the beginning of a New Year – can I assume that as Christians we all spend at least a little time daily reading God's Word and praying? If that is not true for you –can I ask you for 2011 to make that your commitment as a Christian to put in place the discipline of a short time alone with the Lord? The time of day may vary: for some people, the only free time is first thing in the morning before the working day begins ; for others they struggle to surface in a morning and come to life in the evening and find that more suitable. Other still find time in the middle of the day when other family members are out at school or work; whatever times work best for you –set aside that time and guard it with a passion! However, for many of us who have been Christians for years and have modelled a pattern of daily prayer and Bible study, there may be other ways we can grow in our faith. In Bible reading we can buy another Bible version for reading at home that can bring a fresh appreciation to our understanding of even familiar passages of Scripture. For some people making time in the diary for a home-group may be the next step of helping you grow in your faith; We can benefit from reading good Christian literature and a well chosen book can be very helpful, but for people with busy lives it can be hard to find those few minutes in a day to read a few pages or a chapter. Spiritual growth and physical growth should be natural developments, but they don't just happen we need to put in place the resources to help this to happen in a natural way.

(b) **Priority Two – Ministries not one-person ministry** (Acts 18:24-26a) <sup>24</sup> *Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. <sup>25</sup> He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervour and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. <sup>26</sup> He began to speak boldly in the synagogue.* A growing church will have a high proportion of its attenders engaged in aspects of its work. A declining cause or one treading water will have only a small proportion of its members running around frantically trying to keep 'all the balls in the air'. It is the same principle for any voluntary society or club that can only function effectively when its participants own the vision for which the cause was set up. One of my great Christian heroes was Johann Gerhard Oncken (1800-1884), the great German Baptist leader, whose motto was: 'every member a missionary'. Despite incredible persecution over a number of years, from an initial congregation of seven baptised believers in 1834 the work grew to more than 280 Baptist churches founded as a direct result of his work; in addition a further 1222 preaching stations (church-plants) formed, together with 771 Sunday Schools. This

work required each worshipper to be a witness for Jesus Christ and involved in working for Him. Part of the success of the work was the holistic nature of their community work- the church premises were used to distribute all kinds of practical aid to people who had lost everything after the great fire of Hamburg in 1842. This community service was acknowledged by the city council and led to the gradual ending of legal persecution of Baptists between 1848 and 1850. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century the biggest impact the Christian Church will have on the wider community will come through the personal interactions and relationships of individual believers, rather than big events of various kinds. The typical British person today is not primarily asking is it true, but does it work in your life? Pragmatism rather than a commitment to objective truth is where most people are coming from –even if we wish it was a different scenario. There are still sufficient people looking into the truth claims of the Bible and its reliability or concerned about the supposed conflict between the Bible and Science, [actually the conflict is with scientism –the belief that only certain restricted forms of scientific knowledge are valid and information gained, for example from religion or philosophy or other fields of knowledge is of little or no importance. In fairness, a number of key atheist / humanist scientists also reject this position as inadequate] but the majority want to see how your faith has impacted your daily circumstances. Don't underestimate the impact some thoughtful words or a helpful action might have on someone in need. Apollos as a young Christian in the faith took it for granted that God wanted to use the gifts he had in the service of the church. He didn't allow his limited knowledge to hinder his enthusiasm for speaking for Jesus, and neither should we.

**(c) Priority Three –Life-Long Learning (Acts 18:26b-28)**

*When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.<sup>27</sup> When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. On arriving, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed.<sup>28</sup> For he vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ. A number of key points here: First, this couple used their home as a tool for doing God's work. I thank God for the Christians willing to offer people a meal (in their own home or through our church ministry of offering meals to people who would value assistance at a time of particular need); I appreciate also those willing to offer a place to stay when a person needs a bed for the night or a few days. The ministry of hospitality is important in every congregation. Secondly, this couple were willing to invest time in helping this young man grow as a Christian and develop a deeper understanding of the faith. Younger people will have more energy, but older people should have picked up more knowledge and wisdom (both –most of the time!) which can be passed on to newer believers. Notice a wider group of people in the congregation took an interest in Apollos and his service for God and through their knowledge of and interest in God's work further field they were able to commend him to a Christian cause in another place. Likewise we may not be able to invest a lot of time or resources in more than a few people, but we can have a prayerful interest in many more, both at home and overseas. Modern technology allows us to access information and people across the planet, in a way that was inconceivable to most of us less than two decades ago. Apollos here serves as an example of a believer with a teachable spirit, open to learn from other believers as well as serving the Lord. The day we stop learning or seeing the need for it will be a profoundly sad one. It may be appropriate at the start of another year to ask ourselves –in what areas of my life do I need to invest time in acquiring new knowledge or skills that might make me more effective in serving the Lord?*

**2. Discernment (Acts 19:1-10)**

James 1:5 states: *If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.* All of us at times need wisdom or discernment as to how to act in a particular situation. I certainly need to ask for it regularly as I am very conscious of my need for it. The New Testament does not hide the mistakes of the prominent leaders of the church. Why? so that they serve as a reminder to us of our own fallibility that we too are vulnerable to make wrong choices and have to live with the consequences of those actions. Paul in his early years as a believer could only see the faults rather than the potential in other younger believers (Acts 15:37-39; some years later see II Timothy 4:11), unlike Barnabas who was superb at encouraging other people and finding opportunities for them to use their gifts (Acts 11:25-26, for example). Peter and Barnabas relapsed into observing Jewish religious rules under pressure from people of those persuasions in southern Turkey, which separated Jewish and non-Jewish followers of Jesus and prevented them sharing fellowship together, thankfully Paul was able to correct this error in those churches (Galatians 2:11-14). Had he not been successful Christian church life today might have been very different from the teaching of Jesus and closer to the practices of works-based versions of Christianity or even another form of Judaism. What were the particular issues addressed in this passage?

(a) **The necessity of conversion** (Acts 19:1-2) <sup>1</sup> *While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples<sup>2</sup> and asked them, Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed? They answered, No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit<sup>3</sup> So Paul asked, Then what baptism did you receive? John's baptism, they replied. When Apollos was deputed for Paul in Corinth, the apostle took the opportunity to visit the prestigious city of Ephesus. Almost certainly through some Jewish contacts in the city he came across a group of twelve men (the number required under Jewish law at the time to constitute a synagogue) who were followers of John the Baptist. This is an extraordinary situation. How did Paul relate to them? Did he confront them and tell them they were not 'saved'? He is very tactful and asks them questions to discern the nature of their understanding of divine truth. This step is so important for all of us to honour the people we meet by listening to them speak about their beliefs, as well as wanting to share our own understanding of the Gospel of Jesus. Listening to people goes beyond merely hearing their words. Paul, without saying so in direct language, is seeking to discern whether they had ever been converted to believe in God through Jesus. We can often make wrong assumptions about people, assuming in some cases that they know the Lord when they don't or vice versa. A person can be a churchgoer for years, but never discern who Jesus is or why He came. We need the Holy Spirit to open our eyes to see our need of trusting Jesus. When a person becomes a Christian it is not merely the ascent to the truthfulness of some important theological propositions in our minds –though it helps! It is much more than that –it begins with the Holy Spirit enabling us to see our own sinfulness and need of God and eventually pointing us to see Jesus as the only means of salvation from our sin and estrangement from God. The act of conversion is that moment of response to the promptings of the Spirit when we receive for ourselves the wonderful blessings of God's love and grace and are welcomed into His family. A conversion cannot take place without the inner work of the Holy Spirit. This is the point of Paul's question. Are you still good Jews? Or were they men of Jewish ethnic origin who had come to see Jesus as their Messiah? Their answer to his question revealed that they had not yet put their faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour, but were keen to do so. Paul would have been thrilled to pray with them to settle this matter. Have you put your faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour? Each one of us needs to take this step of faith.*

(b) **The centrality of Jesus** (Acts 19:4-5) <sup>4</sup> *Paul said, John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus. <sup>5</sup> On hearing this, they were baptised into the name of the Lord Jesus.* The difference between

Christianity and all other religions is the centrality and supremacy of Jesus Christ. All the major world religions attempt to find a place for Jesus in their tradition, but only one can accommodate Him on His own terms as the One who is truly God and truly man, the person who reconciles God to humanity and humanity to God. He was crucified by the religious authorities because of His exclusivist claims. In John 14:6 *Jesus answered, I [and I only] am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me.* This is not a popular message today. Some people want to proclaim universalism –that everyone gets to heaven anyway. Can you really imagine everyone on earth going to heaven as they are, but keeping heaven as a perfect, totally God-centred and wholly God-glorifying place? Others prefer inclusivism which has its attractions –in essence saying Jesus’ way is the preferred way, but other pathways will do. This will earn popularity here on earth, but not with our Lord in heaven. Where does that leave people who have never heard a meaningful presentation of the gospel? Paul addresses this issue in Romans 2:12-16 and makes it very clear that such people will be judged in the light of the knowledge they had of God and how they responded to their consciences in respect of obedience to His revealed law. No-one will be condemned for not responding to a message they never heard. Each person will be judged fairly in the light of the knowledge of God they had been privileged to hear. However, following Jesus includes the full package of what He stands for –to adopt an inclusivist or universalist position and still want to make sense of the cross is impossible. If there was another way for the world to be saved than by the cross - then the implications for the moral reputation of God the Father are unthinkable. After all in the Garden of Gethsemane, knowing exactly the agonies that lay before Him, Jesus raised this very question in prayer. *He withdrew about a stone’s throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, <sup>42</sup> Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done. <sup>43</sup> An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. <sup>44</sup> And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground (Luke 22:41-44).* The question we face that cannot be avoided is this? Is Jesus my Lord and Saviour, by which I am willing to trust Him fully with the whole of my life, knowing that many people will see things very differently? In this country it may cost some people friendships or a career, in a high proportion of other countries it may cost you your liberty or your life. Jesus made it very plain that one day when we stand before Him the choices we have made on earth will determine our eternal destiny. Matthew 10:32-33: *Whoever acknowledges Me before men, I will also acknowledge him before My Father in heaven. <sup>33</sup> But whoever disowns Me before men, I will disown him before My Father in heaven.* When people in Somalia and North Korea, for example, make the decision to follow Jesus, knowing full well it will end for them in probable torture and a brutal death, there is no excuse for privileged Western Europeans to expect any special favours for denying Him. What is important for us as Christians is that we live in a way that brings honour to the name of Jesus, so that people are attracted to Him and not repelled by the choices we make. Is Jesus central in your life yet?

(c) **The importance of the Holy Spirit** (Acts 19:6-10) <sup>6</sup> *When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. <sup>7</sup> There were about twelve men in all. <sup>8</sup> Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. <sup>9</sup> But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. <sup>10</sup> This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.* When a person becomes a Christian, in that very moment the Holy Spirit enters their life on a permanent basis. In fact Paul bluntly declared in Romans 8:9: *You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, **he does not belong to Christ.*** In I Corinthians 12:13 the

apostle made the same point in a positive way: *For we were **all** baptised by one Spirit into one body— whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free— and we were **all** given the one Spirit to drink.* The term ‘the baptism of the Holy Spirit’, in New Testament theology, refers to the initial reception of the Spirit into the life of a believer. However, although we receive, in principle, all God’s riches in Christ at that time; in practice, we receive His blessings to us over the whole of our lives and into eternity. *We need to go on being filled with the Spirit* [present continuous tense] (Ephesians 5:18b). All Christians are given gifts from the Holy Spirit to use in God’s service for the benefit of other people and for His glory. Why does this particular gift of ‘languages’ (not the old English word ‘tongues’) appear so often in Acts in a context where Jews are present? The answer goes back to a prophecy of Isaiah, more than seven centuries before the time of Jesus. He warned the people of Israel that a day would come when their disobedience to God’s revealed will would result in God changing the nature of His relationship with His covenant people and the sign of that change would be people praising God amongst the Jewish people in foreign languages. Isaiah 28:11: *Very well then, with foreign lips and strange tongues God will speak to this people.* How can we be certain that this interpretation is correct? In the section of I Corinthians that addresses worship (chapters 12-14), Paul quotes Isaiah 28:11-12 to support his point: *Through men of strange tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, but even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord. Tongues then are a sign, not for believers but for [Jewish] unbelievers.* The practical application for us is clear. I am not to live for Jesus in my own strength, but to rely on the empowering of the Holy Spirit to equip and enable me to do all that God asks me to do. It is not about sheer willpower, though the Christian life at times does require serious self-discipline as we strive to live for Jesus, but Spirit-empowered service. Sometimes as Christians we forget to renew our spiritual resources by reading /studying the Bible; prayer and church attendance and fellowship with other believers, and allow our inner ‘tank’ to drift down to almost zero resources left. The problem is not God, but us for not seeking to fill up the tank! ‘Running on empty’ is not a pleasant place to be, but how many of us have been there, and maybe on several occasions not just one? May God help us to keep close to Him and living for Him each day of our lives.

This passage has spoken to us about Christian discipleship: discipleship not just conversions; it highlights ministries not a one-person ministry. It has a vision of life-long learning that Apollos modelled so well. Luke also points to the necessity of discernment, not accepting every person’s claims to religious experience at face value, but to place it under the respectful scrutiny of God’s Word. A true follower of Jesus will have experienced conversion; will affirm and declare the centrality of Jesus in their lives; and will acknowledge the importance of the Holy Spirit empowering them to live for Jesus. May the Lord enable us to follow this pattern in our own lives, for Jesus’ sake, Amen.