

Persuasion

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Date: 21 June 2017

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[0 : 00] Well, friends, good afternoon and welcome. There's a sense of hush descending over the meeting, which suggests that everyone's ready to start. Anyway, warm welcome to everybody here. Very glad to have you here with us. And we're going to be starting some studies in Acts chapter 18, as I think you'll have seen from your order of service. Well, let us bow our heads together for some words of prayer.

Our gracious Father, we do indeed ask that you will bring light into our hearts because our hearts are naturally dark. Naturally, we don't have understanding of you unless and until you reveal it to us from the scriptures.

So be with us today, we pray. Help us to see new things about you. Please endorse and write more deeply in our hearts the things we know about you already so that we might serve you more truly. And more unashamedly and more wholeheartedly. And we pray for all the churches that are represented here, other churches back at home, and ask that in each of these fellowships there may be a continual growth of light and joy, the desire to share the good news and spread it far and wide, and a real sense of encouragement in our fellowship together, especially in the face of the hostilities that the world throws at us so often.

[1 : 24] We do pray that there will be much encouragement in the fellowships here in and around Glasgow. So have mercy upon us today and build us up, we pray. And we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Well, friends, I'm with you, God willing, for four Wednesday lunchtimes. This is the first of four. And my plan is to take just one chapter from the Acts of the Apostles, and that is chapter 18.

And I want to study it in four bites or four sections. So you might like to turn it up. If you have the big hardback Bible, you'll find it on page 927. 927.

And in a moment, I'll read the whole chapter through so that we can get a feeling of where the author is taking us. But let me say first a few words of introduction. At one level, this 18th chapter of Acts is simply a record of Paul's travels.

It begins by telling us, you'll see in the first few verses, that Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. And then verses 2 to 17 describe Paul's adventures in Corinth in full technicolor.

[2 : 31] It's quite vivid. And then you'll see in verses 18 to 23 that there's a lot of detail here about his geographical movements. He goes from Corinth, verse 18, towards Syria.

He sets sail for Syria. He doesn't go straight there, but he stops for various things. He stops for a haircut. We read at Cancra in verse 18. Cancra was just a few miles from Corinth.

He then sets sail across the Aegean Sea to Ephesus in verse 19, which would have been a sea journey of about 150 miles. He then has a brief stay at Ephesus, then a much longer sea journey of about 500 miles from Ephesus down to Caesarea on the coast of Israel.

Then in verse 22, Paul goes up and greets the church. That would have been the church at Jerusalem. And from there, he goes northwards finally to Syria, to Antioch.

Antioch, of course, was his home-based church, his sending church, as we might say in these days. And then after a stay in Antioch, he sets off again further north, up into Galatia and Phrygia, in the interior of what we now know as Turkey.

[3 : 42] So we have here Paul, the tireless traveler, Paul the missionary. And then finally in the chapter, verses 24 to 8, we have a short but very interesting section on Apollos, a Jew from Alexandria in North Africa, which is not far from the modern city of Cairo.

Now, while this is a record of Paul's travels, it's much more than a bare recording of historical facts. As you will know, the author of this book, the Acts of the Apostles, is Luke, Luke the Evangelist.

And the pressing question is, the interesting question is, why did Luke write up these events like this? For example, why does he give such a long section to Paul's activities in Corinth, and yet says so little about Paul's visits to Cancria and Caesarea and Jerusalem and Antioch?

And why include that last paragraph about Apollos in verses 24 to 28? The question is, what is Luke's agenda? Or if you like, what is the agenda of the Holy Spirit who caused Luke to write like this?

So let's bear those questions in mind now. As I read the chapter, and then we'll look at the first section. So here we go. After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth.

[5 : 01] 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 Paul 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 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 own heads. I am innocent. From now on, I will go to the Gentiles.

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. Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord together with his entire household.

[6 : 05] And many of the Corinthians, hearing Paul, believed and were baptized. And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, 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.

And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal, saying, This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law.

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.

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. And he drove them from the tribunal.

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. After this, Paul stayed many days longer, and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila.

[7 : 29] At Cancria, he had cut his hair, but he was under a vow. And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there, but he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews.

When they asked him to stay for a longer period, he declined. But on taking leave of them, he said, I will return to you if God wills. And he set sail from Ephesus. When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up to Jerusalem and greeted the church, and then went down to Antioch.

After spending some time there, he departed and went from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples. Now, a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus.

He was an eloquent man, competent in the scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John.

He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him and explained to him the way of God more accurately. And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him.

[8 : 48] When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.

Amen. Well, let me start by looking at this question that I raised just before reading the chapter. The question is, what is Luke's agenda?

Every Bible book has an agenda. It's God's agenda. God the Holy Spirit inspired each of the biblical authors to present their part of the story in a certain way and from a certain angle.

Bible history is never just a bare record of facts. It interprets facts so as to convey a particular message to the reader. Now, this, of course, is true of any history writing.

You can read the history of Scotland, for example, from an English point of view or from a Scottish point of view, and those points of view will not always converge. Imagine Nicola Sturgeon and Theresa May having a conversation about Scottish history.

[9 : 55] They wouldn't necessarily see it in quite the same way, would they? Or think of Adolf Hitler, who wrote an enormous book called Mein Kampf. I've never attempted to read it. People tell me it's very boring.

But it's a book about his work, his achievements, what he did for Germany from his point of view. But most historians of the 1930s and 40s would write their history of Germany in a very different way from Hitler.

So here with Acts chapter 18, what is the Lord's agenda, which becomes Luke's agenda? Luke's agenda, throughout the Acts of the Apostles, is to commend the gospel and to commend its chief heralds, Peter and Paul, and its more minor heralds like Apollos.

And he also wants to describe the realities of gospel work as the gospel moves out geographically from its starting point in Jerusalem through its first ports of call in Judea and Samaria and then on out towards what Jesus calls the ends of the earth.

Luke, of course, is very selective in what he includes. He must be, has to be. The Acts of the Apostles covers about the first 30 years of gospel expansion between the early 30s AD and the early 60s AD.

[11 : 12] And there was clearly an enormous amount of Christian activity going on during that period. A lot of traveling, churches planted all over the place, there were advances, there were difficulties, there were persecutions, there were joys, there were sorrows.

Luke has only recorded a tiny fraction of all that activity, but he has selected the most significant episodes so that later readers, like ourselves, can best understand the extraordinarily powerful beginnings of Christianity.

I don't know whether our scientists, our physicists, are right in saying that the universe started with a powerful Big Bang some 12 or 13 billion years ago. I don't know about that, but I think I can confidently say that Luke's book of the record of Acts records the Big Bang of the start of gospel work, an explosion, if you like, which is still powerfully at work across the globe 20 centuries later. So Luke has selected very carefully what he includes in his book, and he emphasizes Paul so much because Paul was the spearhead of the great mission in these crucially important first 30 years. Paul is both the geographical spearhead through all his traveling around, but he's also the theological or doctrinal spearhead because he worked out in his sermons and his letters the right understanding of the gospel, the right understanding of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity and how to preach both to Jewish people and to Gentile people.

[12 : 51] But Luke is not hero-worshipping Paul. He's holding Paul up as an example for us to follow. Look at Paul, he's saying. And you will see here the prime example of how to engage the non-Christian world with the gospel.

Look at how he evangelizes Jews and look at how he evangelizes Gentiles. Look at his willingness to suffer hostility and persecution in the service of the gospel and be prepared to endure the same kind of treatment if you have to.

Look at his perseverance and imitate it. Look at the purity of his life and follow in his steps. Look at the pattern of his life and you will see that it reproduces the pattern of the life of Jesus, a life of wonderful love and service and gospel preaching, but ending, like the life of Jesus, in death at the hands of Roman so-called justice.

Now, Paul himself, in his letters, is very conscious of the example that he sets. And he puts it like this very boldly in 1 Corinthians. Be imitators of me, he says, as I am of Christ.

Isn't that a bold thing to say? Imitate me. Follow my example. He says the same thing in three or four other places in his letters. So this is one of the most important reasons for us to study Paul's life and teaching.

[14 : 14] As we get to know both the man and his teaching better, we get to know Jesus and his teaching better. because Paul's life and aims are an expression of Jesus' life and aims.

Do you know how you sometimes hear people say, I love Jesus, but I don't like Paul very much. Well, people who speak like that need to be shown the yellow card or even the red card because they haven't read their Bibles carefully enough.

There's no gap. There's no discrepancy between the teaching of Jesus and the teaching of Paul. What Paul's teaching does is to draw out the implications of Jesus' teaching.

But Paul doesn't take things off in a new direction. He develops his teaching completely in line with what Jesus said and did. The apostles, by definition, are the mouthpieces of Jesus, the ambassadors of Jesus, carrying the king's message out across the world.

Well, let's turn now to our passage, which is just the first four verses of chapter 18. And let's ask ourselves now what kind of example Paul the apostle is setting for us here.

[15:23] And I'll look at this short paragraph under three headings. First, Paul, the missionary. The missionary. Verse 1. After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth.

Well, you might say, what do we learn from that? It sounds so ordinary, doesn't it? Athens and Corinth, two important cities about 50 miles apart. But verse 1 is a bit like saying John left Glasgow and went to Dundee.

But from Luke's pen and in this context, this is a very significant sentence. Athens and Corinth were by a long chalk the two most important cities in ancient southern Greece, which is the area known as Achaia.

Athens was the intellectual capital of Greece, the city known for its great philosophers and politicians of ancient time, famous names like Socrates and Aristotle and Plato had worked there and taught their disciples there.

Corinth was very different. It was the commercial capital of southern Greece, a great center of trade, situated on a very narrow neck of land about two or three miles wide between the Adriatic Sea to the north and west and the Aegean Sea to the east.

[16:35] And therefore, valuable goods were constantly coming and going and being traded and the marketplaces were very busy indeed. And being a commercial center with many traveling traders, information and news, and not least the good news, could quickly be disseminated and sent abroad.

So verse 1 shows us Paul the purposefully focused missionary. If Paul had been working in Scotland rather than this part of the world, he would not have gone to John O'Groats or Kinloch Bervi.

He would have gone to Glasgow and Edinburgh and Dundee and Aberdeen, the places where the population is greatest so that the gospel could have the most impact. He was a strategic missionary.

He didn't despise the smaller places and he did spend some time there, but he spent his long periods of stay in the big centers. But Paul was so determined and focused in his character.

The previous two chapters, chapters 16 and 17, tell us what he'd been doing in the previous weeks and months. In chapter 16, he'd been to Philippi and the church at Philippi began during his visit.

[17:49] But at Philippi, he and Silas, his missionary companion, were beaten and imprisoned. Then in chapter 17, they went on to Thessalonica, where again, a church was started, but they were threatened and they had to leave in a hurry.

Then they went to Berea, a smaller town, and then on down to Athens, where Paul seems to have stayed only for quite a short time. Now, if I'd been Paul at the end of Acts chapter 17, I think I would have wanted to go home at that point to Tarsus and take a three-month sabbatical and read a few Agatha Christie's and eat well and sleep well and get over the shock of how badly I'd been treated at Philippi.

But not Paul. That wasn't his way. He pressed on. Paul was always pressing on. He was a man with a mission. And of course, it was Jesus who had sent him.

It was Jesus who had commissioned him to be a traveling evangelist. It all started, of course, when Paul, the persecutor of the churches, staggered blinded into Damascus in about 34 AD.

And the Lord Jesus sent to him a Christian named Ananias. Ananias knew about Paul and was rather frightened to go and see him because Paul had a toxic reputation.

[19:03] But this is what the Lord said to Ananias about Paul. Go to him, for he is a chosen instrument. Just bear that phrase in mind. He's a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and the children of Israel.

For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name. And we can be certain that Ananias passed that message faithfully on to Paul.

And here we see Paul, some 15 or 20 years later, fulfilling that commission, taking the gospel of Christ to the Gentiles and suffering at times greatly for his pains for the sake of Jesus. The Christian faith is by its very terms and title deeds a missionary faith. It always has been and it always will be.

Jesus said to the apostles in Matthew chapter 28, Go and make disciples of all nations. He said to the same apostles in John chapter 20, As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.

[20 : 10] That's his message to them. I'm sending you. Go. And that's what Paul was doing in Acts chapter 18 in obedience to Jesus. Now if Paul is our example, we too will be deeply missionary-minded people.

Not many Christians I know can physically go abroad to unevangelized populations. I personally am now too old and creaky. And if my eyes don't deceive me, some of you also look a bit creaky as well.

But all of us are able to be missionaries in our own way, missionaries in our own streets and to our own relatives and friends. And we can all support enthusiastically the missionaries that our churches send out to foreign parts of the world.

So let's keep doing this, friends, and do it more and more. Paul left Athens and went to Corinth.

Focused, purposeful, very determined.

Then secondly, Luke shows us Paul, the networker. I think verses 2 and 3 are delightful. He gets to Corinth, but he doesn't seek out the best hotel.

[21 : 20] He probably didn't have the cash to pay for that kind of treatment anyway. What he does is to ferret out a married couple by going down to the part of the city where the tent makers and the leather workers congregated.

You know how our modern cities have malls, as we call them these days. Malls where there are lots of shops and the shoppers go and buy their stuff. Well, ancient cities had streets or areas where people of similar interest or similar trade would get together for the purpose of trade.

Well, Paul goes, you might say, to the tent makers' wind. And he finds a Christian couple there, Aquila and Priscilla. Hello, he says. My name is Paul from Tarsus.

I'm a Christian. Well, blessings on the God of Israel, says the other man. I'm a Christian too. Aquila from Pontus. And this lady is my delightful and competent wife, Priscilla.

I don't know where they... I think she must have been, actually. We can pick up the clues from elsewhere. And thus begins a really significant friendship between Paul and this couple.

[22 : 25] Now, Aquila and Priscilla, we learn it from these verses, had already suffered a lot. Look at verse 2, which tells us that Claudius, who was then the Roman emperor, had recently expelled all the Jews from Rome.

And it may well be that Jewish Christians, Jews in the sense of Christians, were his primary target. So here was a couple who'd already suffered really adverse circumstances.

Aquila came from Pontus. That's up in northern Turkey at the southern edge of the Black Sea. So they were hardened travelers. Aquila's. And they appear in Paul's letters several times.

The most noticeable example comes in Romans chapter 16, where Paul, at the end of his great letter, is sending greetings to various friends in the church there. And he says this.

He puts Prisca, as he calls it, shortens her name to Prisca, and he puts them at the top of the list. Greet Prisca and Aquila, he says, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well.

[23 : 33] Greet also the church in their house. I would love to know just how Prisca and Aquila had risked their necks to save Paul. But that suggests, first, that persecution was widespread, and secondly, that Aquila and Prisca were people of real courage, that they understood Paul's unique role and significance, and they were prepared to go great lengths, to go to great lengths in order to protect him.

But our verses 2 and 3 here show how important it was for Paul and for the Christian mission to develop a network of fellow workers who could support each other through thick and thin.

And throughout church history, and certainly very much today, whenever the gospel has made significant advances, it has been through networks of believers, networks of churches working together.

Paul was never a solo operator. He would never have thought of himself like that. He was very much the leader, but he always worked with many different people, not just his famous fellow

evangelists like Barnabas and Silas, but with many others as well.

The final chapters of a number of his letters include greetings to all sorts of people. He loved a great many people, and he knew that without them, the work could simply not go forward.

[24 : 51] So let's follow Paul's example and be constantly building up the network of his people so that the whole mission of the church will prosper. Then thirdly, Paul the persuader.

In verse 4, we see Paul beginning to go to work at Corinth. And Luke writes, he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks.

Don't you think those are very interesting verbs? He reasoned and he tried to persuade. If you turn over the page to chapter 19, verse 8, you'll see the same thing where Paul is now in Ephesus.

He spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading the Ephesians about the kingdom of God. Do you find it surprising that his method was to reason and to try and persuade?

Now those aren't the only verbs used of Paul. In our chapter, verse 5, Luke speaks of him testifying to Jesus that he was the Christ.

[26 : 01] And then in verse 11, it speaks of him teaching. But look at verse 13 again, where his opponents accuse him of persuading people to worship God contrary to the law.

It's clear, I think, that Paul's method in evangelism was to reason and persuade. When speaking to Jews, as verse 5 tells us, his main aim was to persuade them from Scripture, from the Old Testament, that the Christ was Jesus.

That was the difficult thing. They didn't need persuading that there was going to be a Christ. They all believed that the Christ was promised in the Old Testament. The hard thing was for Paul to persuade the Jews that Jesus was the Christ because he was a different kind of Christ from the one they expected.

When Paul spoke to Greek or Gentile audiences, his tactic was rather differently angled. But with them also, persuasion was his aim, persuading them to believe in Christ and to follow him.

So I think we are bound to ask, can anybody be persuaded to submit to Christ and become a Christian? We might say, isn't it God who does this work?

[27 : 08] Isn't it God who softens hard hearts and opens blind eyes? Well, yes, it is indeed. It is all of God. But the method that God pleases to use is the persuasive arguments of the evangelist.

The whole Bible, if you think about it, is a persuasive argument. It's an argument from God. It's a sermon from God. And the argument of the Bible, to put it in a nutshell, is this.

God is your creator and he loves you. But you've rebelled against him. Doesn't it stand to reason? Look at your life. You're beyond Eden. You're cast out from his presence.

But now, after many centuries, the long-awaited Savior has come, sent from God. He has taken the penalty for your sins and has brought forgiveness.

He's died in your place. So repent. Jesus not only died, but was raised. And you too will be brought to everlasting life if you come to him in trust and repentance.

[28 : 07] Now, friends, you know that. That's the shape of the basic gospel, isn't it? But it is an argument. People need to be persuaded. You and I have been persuaded if we're Christians.

If you're not persuaded of the truth about Jesus, you can't be a Christian. Now, Paul knew this and that's why he did his work in the manner of verse 4. So let's follow Paul's example and do our best to persuade people.

You and I don't have the brains of a great thinker like the apostle Paul, but we can still play our own part. I wasn't persuaded of the truth by some mighty brain box, just by ordinary Christians, and probably you weren't either.

We can all chip in our pennyworth. God loves to use the pennyworths of ordinary people like us. So Luke is showing us Paul the missionary, determined and focused.

Paul the networker, building up those links of love and fellowship in the church. And Paul the persuader, the arguer, for the case for the gospel. Luke is writing up his account in a very purposeful way.

[29 : 14] He's not simply recording bare facts. He's giving us an example to follow in the person of Paul. and he's giving us an example of how the gospel makes progress in every generation as it continues to do today.

Well, let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Dear God, our Father, we thank you so much that Paul was a chosen instrument of the Lord Jesus to bear his name and the good news about him before the Gentiles and their kings and also the children of Israel.

And we thank you that Paul is a great example to us of how to do missionary work, of how to live a life of love and purity and evangelism as well.

So please help us, dear Father, to follow his example as he asks the churches to do. And give us a desire, ever growing and ever deepening to be missionary people who follow in the footsteps of this man who was chosen for this task.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.