**The Establishing of the Corinthian Church**

(Acts 18:1-11)

By Pastor Ricky Kurth

Russian president Vladimir Putin walked into a bar one evening with a fly on top of his head. The bartender was brave enough to tell him, “You can’t come in here with that filthy thing! I run a clean establishment here. The fly replied, “Sorry, but it’s stuck to my feet.”

Speaking of clean establishments, here in Acts 18 the Apostle Paul is about to establish a *church* in the city of Corinth. The story begins in verse where, we see that after Paul finished preaching to the intellectuals on Mars Hill in Athens,

**“After these things Paul departed from Athens, and came to Corinth” (Acts 18:1).**

Now if the city of Corinth sounds familiar, it’s because after Paul established a church in Corinth, he later wrote *two* of his thirteen epistles to that church.

But Paul’s *approach* to establishing this church is going to be a little *different* than the way he established *other* churches. See if you notice the difference as we read the next two verses of Acts 18:

**“And found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, lately come from Italy, with his wife Priscilla; (because that Claudius had commanded all Jews to depart from Rome:) and came unto them.**

**“And because he was of the same craft, he abode with them, and wrought: for by their occupation they were tentmakers” (Acts 18:2,3).**

Normally when Paul entered a city, he made a beeline for *the synagogue* to go preach the gospel. He’ll bet around to that in a minute. But first, we have to ask why he decided to break protocol here and apply for a job *before* he went to the synagogue.

The answer is that he didn’t want the people of Corinth to think that he was after their *money.* You see, Corinth was a tremendously *wealthy* city. It was a *seaport* city, and seaports always had a lot of commercial traffic going in and out of their ports, traffic that *enriched* the people who *lived* in those seaports.

And Corinth was actually a *double* seaport. It was located on an *isthmus,* a narrow strip of land connecting two *larger* sections of land, with a body of water on each side. The isthmus of *Panama* was narrow enough to build a *canal* across it, and the isthmus of *Corinth* was even narrower, allowing a *city* to be built across it. So Corinth had a seaport on both sides. That meant they had *twice* the commercial traffic of other seaports, and twice the *wealth* of other seaports as a result.

Back in 1974, the Chrysler Corporation hired actor Ricardo Montalban to make a commercial advertising their top of the line model, the Chrysler Imperial Lebaron. In my mind, I can still hear him saying that the Lebaron’s seats were made from “fine Corinthian leather.” That shows that Corinth has *historically* been associated with *wealth* and *affluence.*

And Paul didn’t want the wealthy people of Corinth to think that he was some religious *huckster* who had come to town to *swindle* them out of their money, for there were so many of those types of men in those days, their name could have been Legion. So before Paul started preaching in the synagogue, he got a *job* to support himself in the ministry while he was in Corinth.

Now we’re not told *why* the Roman emperor Claudius evicted the Jews from Rome, but Jews were always hated because they were *different* than other people. They didn’t eat certain foods, and they didn’t wear clothes made of two different kinds of fabric, and they were different in a lot of other ways as well.

And people are just naturally *prejudiced* against people who are different than they are, as we see when God says of His people in Israel,

**“Mine heritage is unto Me as a speckled bird, *the birds round about are against her...”* (Jeremiah 12:9).**

Birds of a feather flock together because they evidently hate birds of a *different* feather. So if you don’t like certain people just because they’re a different color, you have more in common with an unsaved pagan Roman emperor than you have in common with the Lord Jesus Christ.

But Paul was actually glad that Claudius evicted Aquila and Priscilla because, when he found them, he found immediate employment, for he was a tentmaker as well. Before he became a famous rabbi, his father taught him to be a tentmaker the way the Lord’s father taught *Him* to be a carpenter.

And tentmaking was the perfect trade for the apostle who tells us to

**“Study...*rightly dividing the word of truth”* (II Timothy 2:15).**

You see, when we tell Christians that the Bible has to be divided between the parts written to kingdom saints and the parts written to us in Paul’s epistles, they sometimes accuse us of cutting up the Bible and throwing away the parts not written to us. But that’s not how Paul made tents! He cut the fabric up, but then he sowed the parts back together to make something useful out of them.

And that’s what we do after we divide the Scriptures. We sew the parts of the Bible we divided back together to make something useful out of the Scriptures. Hey, a Bible that contradicts itself is of no use to anybody, and the Bible *does* contradict itself if you don’t rightly divide it.

Now sometimes when the Bible mentions Aquila and Priscilla, *she* gets mentioned first, and I sometimes get asked why. It might be because she had the more outgoing personality, so naturally she’d come to mind first when people thought about them. But it *also* might be because they eventually became Paul’s coworkers in the Lord’s work, and that means they probably *lodged* with them on occasion. And wives generally take the lead when it comes to hosting guests. If that’s the case, that might be why we find both Luke and Paul mentioning Priscilla first, for Luke often traveled with Paul, so she would host him as well.

Either way, now that Paul has a job, he can start preaching in the next verse of our text:

**“And he reasoned in the synagogue every sabbath, and persuaded the Jews and the Greeks” (Acts 18:4).**

Now I bet Paul preached pretty hard in Corinth because of what he *saw* in Corinth. Back in Athens, he got stirred up to preach hard when he saw all the *idolatry* in Athens. But Corinth wasn’t known for idolatry, it was known for *immorality.* Seaports had a lot of *sailors* coming ashore, and—well, did you ever hear anyone say, “That guy has the morals of a *sailor.”* And as a *double* seaport, Corinth would have *double the sailors.*

And the sailors weren’t the only ones contributing to the immorality and debauchery found in Corinth. The *passengers* coming ashore off those ships were far from home, where they’d have to worry about what people thought of them. So they figured what happened in Corinth *stayed* in Corinth.

Now I say all that to remind you that the *church* in Corinth was *also* known for immorality, such as the *fornication* Paul discussed in I Corinthians 5. And now you know *why* immorality was such a problem in the church. They were *surrounded* by immorality in that immoral city, and the sinful nature of the city had permeated the church.

But I hasten to add that that *explains* the immorality in the Corinthian church, *but it doesn’t excuse it.* I know defense attorneys will sometimes try to get a thief off the hook by saying, “Your honor, my client can’t be judged responsible for his actions, for he grew up in a high crime area.”

But that doesn’t excuse anything! Plenty of people come from bad neighborhoods and decide to do what’s *right* instead of what’s *wrong.* At some point you have to take some personal responsibility for your actions—*especially* if you’re a Christian. Beloved, you can make God’s grace shine *all the brighter* if you live *godly* in an *ungodly* world.

But no matter how hard Paul preached when he saw the immorality in Corinth, we know he stepped up his game in the next verse of our text, where we read:

**“And when Silas and Timotheus were come from Macedonia, Paul was pressed in the spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus was Christ” (Acts 18:5).**

Now here again we see the importance of *fellowship* with other believers. I mean, it even got *the Apostle Paul’s* juices flowing, and revitalized his spiritual drive.

But there was *also* something *else* that got his juices flowing. Timothy brought him news from Macedonia! Remember, the unsaved Jews in Thessalonica drove Paul out of town just a chapter ago in Acts 17. When that happened, Paul knew they would turn their attention to the new believers he left behind in Thessalonica, and being persecuting *them* in his absence. And the apostle was extremely concerned that that persecution would cause those new saints to fall away from the faith. So he wrote them a letter and said,

**“...when we could no longer forbear, we thought it good to be left at Athens alone; And sent Timotheus...to establish you, and to comfort you concerning your faith: That no man should be moved by these afflictions....For this cause, *when I could no longer forbear*, I sent to know your faith...” (I Thessalonians 3:1-5).**

Now I can assure you, the apostle Paul *never* thought it good to be left alone! He craved Christian fellowship the way you crave White Castles. C’mon, admit it. You gotta have ‘em once a year or so!

But when Paul was in Athens, he sent Timothy *back* to Thessalonica to check on those believers, even though that left him alone in Athens, because he just had to know if the Thessalonians were standing firm in the faith.

And as it says in the rest of that passage,

**“...when Timotheus came from you unto us, *and brought us good tidings of your faith....*we were comforted overyou in all our affliction and distress by your faith...” (I Thessalonians 3:6,7).**

Timothy returned from Thessalonica to look for Paul in Athens, but Silas was all he found. Together they heard from the brethren that Paul had moved on to Corinth, so they were able to catch up with him there, and convey the news that the Thessalonians *were* standing firm in the faith. *That’s* what got Paul’s juices flowing here in verse 5 of our text, for this is where Timothy brought Paul that good news!

And when Paul heard that good news, it pressed him in the spirit and positively *energized* him! He put the pedal to the metal and *really* began to preach Christ.

And that’s something you should think about on those Sunday mornings when you’re finding it hard to get out of bed to go to church. You need to see the members of your church family standing faithfully for the truth if you want to have any hope of staying faithful yourself. That’s just how it works.

But no matter how pressed in the spirit Paul was, or how hard he preached to those Jews in the Corinthian synagogue, it didn’t seem to matter, for verse 6 says,

**“And when they opposed themselves, and blasphemed, he shook his raiment, and said unto them, Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean; from henceforth I will go unto the Gentiles” (Acts 18:6).**

Now when it says they “opposed themselves,” in this context that phrase means they *contradicted* themselves when they tried to argue with Paul. And when they realized they were contradicting themselves, that made them angry enough to *blaspheme.* And that made *Paul* do what the Lord taught the twelve to do in Matthew 10:5,7,14:

**“These twelve Jesus sent forth, and commanded them, saying.... go, preach....*And whosoever shall not...hear your words,* when ye depart out of that house or city, *shake off the dust of your feet”***

What this was was a symbolic gesture that was similar to to the one Pilate used at the Lord’s trial:

**“When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, *and washed his hands before the multitude,* saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it” (Matthew 27:24).**

When Pilate tried to release the Lord, those unsaved Jews just kept demanding that He be crucified. So he ceremonially washed his hands of the Lord. That was his way of saying he was clean from the Lord’s blood. He wasn’t, of course, but that’s what he was claiming with that gesture.

And Paul’s gesture of shaking the dust of those Christ-rejecting Jews off of his raiment was his way of saying he was clean from *their* blood, for he had warned them that they needed to get saved.

But now, does that mean if Paul *hadn’t* warned them, he’d have been *guilty* of their blood in some way? The answer is *yes—*at least according to the verse that Paul was quoting. He was quoting what God told the prophet Ezekiel, where He said,

**“When I say unto the wicked, *Thou shalt surely die;* and thou givest him not warning, nor speakest to warn the wicked from his wicked way...the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; *but his blood will I require at thine hand.* Yet if thou warn the wicked, and he turn not from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; *but thou hast delivered thy soul”* (Ezekiel 3:18,19).**

Now this is something I get asked about at BBS from time to time. Christians write and ask, “If we don’t give the gospel to a man, and he dies and goes to hell, does that mean his blood is on *us* for not warning him?” And as you can imagine, the Christians who ask this are *very* troubled by that thought, because it’s a troublesome thought.

But here you have to remember that Paul was *an apostle,* and Ezekiel was *a prophet.* So both men were God’s official spokesmen in their respective dispensations. That means if *they* didn’t do their jobs, it would mess with the entire program of God in their dispensations.

This explains what Paul meant when he later wrote the Corinthians, saying,

**“...though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for *necessity* is laid upon *me;* yea, woe is unto me,if *I* preach not the gospel! For...*a dispensation of the gospel is committed unto me”* (I Corinthians 9:16,17).**

Now Paul wasn’t saying there that God expected him as a Christian to dispense the gospel to the people he ran into in life. He did, but that’s not what he was saying *there.* There he was saying that God expected him to *dispense* the gospel so Christians would *have* a gospel to give people. The gospel of “Christ died for our sins” was given to him to give to us!

This is the only way to explain what Paul said in Acts 20:26, where he wrote:

**“...I am pure from the blood of *all* men.”**

How could Paul say he was pure from the blood of every man on the planet? He certainly hadn’t shared the gospel with all men.

But look how he *finished* his words there in Acts 20:

**“...I am pure from the blood of all men. *For* I have not shunned to declare unto *you* all the counsel of God” (Acts 20:26,27).**

That word “for” there means he was pure from the blood of all men because he had supplied the gospel *to the pastors he was talking to there.* He knew they’d supply it to *other* pastors, who in turn would supply it to still *other* pastors and teachers. And *that’s* how Paul was pure from the blood of all men. And you can’t be *guilty* of the blood of *any* man in that respect, because you’re not an apostle who’d been commissioned with dispensing the message of the gospel.

Now if that’s not clear to you, think about it this way. If I’m unsaved, and you share the gospel of Christ with me, and I reject it, would you say, “I’m not giving the gospel to any more Polaks! From here on out, I’m going *to the Mexicans!”* You wouldn’t do that, would you? But isn’t that what Paul is doing here? He was saying, “Your blood is on you Jews. From henceforth, I’m going to the Gentiles.”

Beloved, we don’t have the God-given authority to make pronouncements like that—*but Paul did!*

And here’s another difference. Paul said *“woe”* was unto him if he *didn’t* dispense the gospel. But *our* motivation to *preach* the gospel is not to avoid any woes that might come our way if we don’t. Our motivation is found in II Corinthians 5:14,15,20, where Paul wrote these same Corinthians,

**“...the *love* of Christ constraineth us...that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them....*Now then we are ambassadors for Christ,* as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, *be ye reconciled to God.”***

It’s *the love of Christ* that constrains us to share the gospel as *ambassadors* for Christ, not the fear of what He’ll do to us if we don’t. Now I’m not telling you not to share the gospel with people. I’m just telling you to do it for the right reason.

Well, when Paul told the Jews in verse 5 of our text, “from henceforth I will go to the Gentiles,” doesn’t that sound a lot like what he said to the Jews in Antioch back in Acts 13:46?

**“It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you: *but seeing ye put it from you,* and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, *lo, we turn to the Gentiles.”***

There Paul said he was *turning* to the Gentiles, but here he says, “I will *go* to the Gentiles.” And that word “henceforth” in verse 5 means *from this time forward.*

The problem with that pronouncement was, Paul had just finished going to a whole *hill* full of Gentiles on Mars Hill in Athens, just a few verses ago in Acts 17. So how could he say he was going to the Gentiles *from this time forward?* He must mean he was going to start going to the Gentiles *in a different way.*

People smarter than me tell me that this is where Paul started writing *epistles* to the Gentiles. We know he wrote the epistle of I Thessalonians from here, because we’ve already seen that he told them how glad he was to hear they were standing fast in the faith—and he just heard about that from Timothy here! He even *said*,

**“But *now* when Timotheus came from you unto us, and brought us good tidings of your faith...” (I Thessalonians 3:6).**

So this is where Paul started writing epistles to the Gentiles.

But it wasn’t the last time he washed his hands of the Jews. He did it a *third* time at the *end* of the Book of Acts in Acts 28:27,28, where he told the Jews who’d just rejected his message:

**“...*the heart of this people is waxed gross,* and their ears are dull of hearing, *and their eyes have they closed;* lest they should see with their eyes, *and hear with their ears,* and understand with their heart, *and should be converted....*Be it known therefore unto you, that the salvation of God is *sent* unto the Gentiles.”**

Do you see that word “sent” there? In those days, you couldn’t send a message by email, you had to send it *by epistle.* And that’s what Paul had been doing throughout the Book of Acts, beginning here in Corinth.

By the way, have you ever heard of the “3 strike” rule? I’m not talking about the rule that applies when one of the Cubs players gets up to bat. I’m talking about the law in some states that says when you commit 3 crimes, it’s 3 strikes and you’re out. They lock you up *and throw away the key.*

Well, that’s what happened to Israel in Acts. In Romans 11:12, Paul spoke of Israel and talked about

**“...the *fall* of them...and the *diminishing* of them...”**

After the nation of Israel *fell* when they stoned Stephen in Acts 7, they “diminished” during the rest of the Book of Acts, until they got to that 3rd strike in Acts 28, when Paul pronounced judgment on their nation for the 3rd and final time. It was then that God locked Israel up—but He didn’t throw away the key! The nation Israel will only remain locked up until after the Rapture puts an end to the dispensation of grace, and the people of Israel become His people once again.

But in the meantime, Paul went out and started churches among the Gentiles, as we see as we read on:

**“And he departed thence, and entered into a certain man's house, named Justus, one that worshipped God, whose house joined hard to the synagogue” (Acts 18:7).**

Now there’s a couple of *Jews* in the New Testament named Justus, but we know *this* Justus was a Gentile, for if he wasn’t, he’d have been in the synagogue with the Jews that day, right? But the way I read verse 7 is: Paul stormed out of the synagogue, and entered this guys house a moment later. So unless Paul was guilty of breaking and entering, that means Justus was probably sitting on his porch and *invited* Paul to enter his house.

So I think he was a Gentile who lived in a house that was right next door to the synagogue—*so* “right next door” that it “joined hard” to the synagogue. In other words, they shared a common wall. And the church in Corinth was established that very day, when that Gentile got saved. I know verse 7 says that Justus already “worshipped God” before Paul got there, but that doesn’t mean he was saved! Go back and read Acts 10, and you’ll see that Cornelius was *also* said to have worshipped God before he got saved. Worshipping God just meant that Justus knew that Israel’s God was the *true* God.

But if he knew that, how come he didn’t convert to Judaism by becoming what the Bible calls a proselyte? We can’t be sure, of course. But if I had to guess, I’d say it was because he suspected that this famous Jew named *Jesus* he’d heard so much about was Israel’s Christ, and the Jews in the synagogue next door *denied* it. But sitting on his porch, he overheard *Paul* say that Jesus was Christ, for I’m sure Paul’s pressed spirit had him speaking pretty loudly that day. So after Justus heard Paul preach that Jesus was Israel’s Christ, he invited the apostle in to his house to hear *more* about Christ.

And when that Gentile got saved, it caused a Jew to get saved—and not just any Jew! Verse 8 of our text reads,

**“And Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his house; and many of the Corinthians hearing believed, and were baptized” (Acts 18:8).**

So why would the ruler of the synagogue get saved after seeing a Gentile get saved? Well, do you remember what Paul said to the Romans in Romans 1:13,14?

**“I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, *I magnify mine office:* If by any means I may provoke to *emulation* them which are my flesh, *and might save some of them.”***

The reason Paul went from synagogue to synagogue, preaching Christ and telling those Jews about his apostleship to the Gentiles, was to provoke them to *emulation.* And emulation means to make someone *so jealous* that they want to *equal* you or *excel* you at what you’re doing.

And it worked with Crispus here! Every sabbath day, he probably walked past Justus, sitting on his porch, *and prayed for him.* But Justus never decided to convert and become a proselyte. So when *Paul* was able to convert the man, Crispus was provoked to emulation, and decided to join Paul and try to equal or excel what he was doing among the Gentiles.

And because Crispus was the *ruler* of the synagogue, that explains what Paul wrote later in ICorinthians 1:14-16:

**“I thank God that I baptized none of you, but *Crispus* and Gaius... And I baptized also the household of Stephanas: besides, I know not whether I baptized any other.”**

As Paul was sitting there trying to remember who he had baptized in Corinth, it was easy to remember Crispus, for he was the ruler of the synagogue!

But just think of how *embarrassing* it was for the Jews in that synagogue to have *their pastor* quit and join the church next door! That’s gotta smart—*and* make you *angry.*

And just when they thought things couldn’t possibly get worse, verse 8 *also* says that “many” of the Corinthian Gentiles believed and converted. How embarrassing was it for them to think, “How come *we* couldn’t get those Gentiles to convert?” That provoked them to *envy* Paul’s ministry among the Gentiles, instead of *emulating* it.

Do you know what *else* provoked those unsaved Jews to envy Paul’s Gentile ministry? When the Corinthians began to *speak in tongues.* What’s Paul say in I Corinthians 14:22?

**“...tongues are for a sign...to them that believe not”**

Tongues were a sign to unbelievers—but not to just *any* unbelievers. Paul *also* said,

**“...*the Jews* require a sign...” (I Corinthians 1:22).**

So those tongues in the church in Corinth were a sign *to the unbelieving Jews next door,* to provoke them to jealousy! Remember, miraculous signs *belonged* to the Jews, as we see when the psalmist prayed,

**“...we see not *our* signs...” (Psalm 74:9).**

Now God *took away* Israel’s miraculous signs when the Jews were disobedient to God. And hey, they were sure disobedient when they crucified Christ and stoned His prophet! *That’s* why God took away the gift of tongues He gave His people at Pentecost in Acts 2, as a sign—a sign that God was *judging* them!

And then, to add insult to injury, God took the signs He took away from the Jews *and gave them to the Gentiles next door.* That provoked them to so much jealousy, they decided to *kill* Paul.

You say, “How do you know that?” Well, Paul later wrote the Corinthians, saying,

**“I was with you *in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling”* (I Corinthians 2:3).**

It doesn’t say anything about that in our text, of course. But if those unsaved Jews weren’t trying to kill Paul, how else can we explain what we read in verses 9 and 10 of our text:

**“Then spake the Lord to Paul in the night by a vision, Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace:**

**“For I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee: for I have much people in this city.”**

Why would God out of the blue tell Paul not to be afraid unless those unbelieving Jews were *making* him afraid?

But now that Paul had God’s Word on it that nobody was going to hurt him, he decided to speak now and *never* hold his peace, because he *also* had God’s word on it that he had “much people” in Corinth.

Now our Calvinist friends would suggest that what God meant there is that He had chosen a lot of the Corinthians to be saved, so they were His people even *before* they got saved. But we know God *doesn’t* choose men to be saved, *we* have to decide to believe. So what the Lord was *really* talking about was the people Paul mentioned when he wrote the Corinthians,

**“...ye see your calling, brethren, how that *not many wise men after the flesh,* not many *mighty*, not many *noble*, are called: But God hath chosen the *foolish* *things* *of the world* to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the *weak* *things of the world* to confound the things which are mighty...and *things which are despised,* hath God chosen, yea, *and things which are not”* (I Corinthians 1:26-28).**

*Those* are the people the Lord was talking about when He told Paul he had “much people” in Corinth. When God looked down at that city, He saw a lot of humble people who were *much* more likely to be saved than the “wise” philosophers Paul just left behind in Athens. And once Paul heard God say that nobody would hurt him and stop him from reaching those people, it says in the last verse of our text,

**“And he continued there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them” (Acts 18:11).**

Paul stayed longer in Corinth than in any other city before that, and because of this, that church grew into the *largest* assembly Paul established.

Do you know what that means? It means when you look around you and see the world getting more and more *immoral* all the time, just say *bless God,* for people like the Corinthians are much more likely to get saved than self-righteous people. The Lord told the Pharisees,

**“...*the harlots* go into the kingdom of God before you” (Matthew 21:31).**

Can’t you just picture the reaction He got when He told them that? I imagine one Jew saying to another, “Did He just say the hookers will get saved before our religious leaders will?”

But He was right, for hookers and other carnal, immoral people like Paul found in Corinth *knew they needed a Savior,* unlike the self-righteous Pharisees.

Aren’t you glad you were foolish and despised enough to believe the gospel and get saved? I know I am!