

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Series: Next!

(studies in the book of Acts)

In Community, On Mission

(Acts 18:1--21:16)

Study #21

Introduction: The Athens anomaly...

When the Apostle Paul brought the Gospel to Athens, he displayed unsurpassed ministry skills, gifts, and strategies, giving us a shining example of A+ apostling.

- There was a brilliant evangelism strategy.
- There was boldness - with both Jews and Greeks, and the kind of boldness appropriate to each group.
- There was sensitivity to the needs of people.
- There was an acute awareness of the worldview of whichever audience he was addressing.
- There was intimate familiarity with the secular culture of his day.

Many, many missionaries and church planters and other Christians eager to make an impact on their world have spent long hours poring over Paul's work in Athens, looking to learn as much from his ways as possible.

However, separate from extreme ministry savvy, there was *something* about the time in Athens that Paul would never ever repeat (at least when he had a choice in the matter!).

His refusal to repeat this piece of his Athens experience says volumes to us, today, about life in Christ and about how to best serve Him.

And, as a result of our time in Scripture today, we'll see that *something* in bold relief and will hear the Lord call us to *something more*.

Paul stayed in Athens long enough to see a few people come to Christ, and then left, heading south about forty miles, where he arrived at the city of Corinth.¹

As soon as he arrived, he looked for partners, teammates. And he quickly located a married couple who proved invaluable to him and to the Christian cause.

Paul in Corinth (18:1-17)

Corinthian Tent-Making (18:1-6)

Meet Aquila and Priscilla (18:1-3)

[1] After these things he left Athens and went to Corinth. [2] And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, having recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. He came to them, [3] and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and they were working, for by trade they were tent-makers.

Now, Corinth was a big (about 200,000 in population) and influential city. It had a great seaport, was located at the crossroads of commerce on the Mediterranean Sea, and was the site of the bi-annual Isthmian Games (like the Olympic Games)

As you know from living in one, friends are REALLY important in a big city. It's easy to get lost in the city without friends.

To find friends, Paul went to the Corinthian synagogue and found Aquila and Priscilla, two Jews who were also believers in Jesus.

Aquila and his wife had been forced to leave their home in Rome, since Emperor Claudius had forced all Jews out of the capitol city (this being only one of many anti-Semitic purges throughout history).²

¹ You could go by land or by sea from Macedonia to Achaia, since there was a land bridge connecting the mainland from the isthmus on which Corinth was located.

These two served as Paul's sponsors in Corinth. They provided him with housing AND with a way to make a living, since they and he were both trained in tent-making (or, possibly, simply leatherwork, generally).

All three of them worked with their hands. Aquila and Priscilla plied their trade in a full-time capacity while Paul was more of a part-timer. He only worked enough to barely make ends meet (and probably being partially supported by Aquila and Priscilla), and then devoted whatever leftover time he had to Gospel work.³

Weekend spiritual warrior (18:4)

[4] And he was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.

During the better part of the week Paul was occupied with the work-a-day world of tent-making. But when the Sabbath rolled around, he would look for opportunities to share Christ.

Real briefly, I want to just say that the example of Paul and the example of Aquila and Priscilla represents the "Jesus-serving norms" over the last two thousand years.

Some, like Aquila and Priscilla, have a God-honoring, full-time professional life all week long. They are bright witnesses for Christ on the job. Then, they look for opportunities to serve Jesus when they are not "on the clock."

Others, like Paul, are also gainfully employed - to some extent - but are also at least partially supported by full-timers, freeing them up to more fully engage in Christian ministry.

Most everybody who is a part of Northwest follows the model of Aquila and Priscilla. You work hard during the week at your job.

You contribute to society through your job and you honor God by your work. You support your family by your work.

In addition, your job serves as a strategic setting for making Kingdom-of-God sized impact in the lives of your co-workers and contacts. Your job allows you to be "salt and light" witnesses for Jesus. And your job provides enough income both for you to live AND for you to support others who follow the example of Paul, and either work part-time or full-time in ministry.

Paul's tent-making days came to a halt when two of his friends, Silas and Timothy, arrived in Corinth.

Freed up by the arrival of friends (18:5)

[5] But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul began devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.

Evidently, as soon as these two blew into town, they immediately went to work. They made enough money to both fully support themselves and to make it possible for Paul to do nothing but proclaim the Gospel.

Aquila and Priscilla and Silas and Timothy provided a tremendous ministry by their diligent, God-honoring work!

They not only served people by making tents and no doubt had opportunities to share Christ while on the job, but they also freed up Paul to push the Gospel forward in Corinth.

That, by the way, is what you do through your job. You are 21st century Aquilas and Priscillas, shining for Jesus where you work, and freeing up people like me and Pastor Guillermo and Scott, Charlie, Judy, Jacob, and Jackie - to push the Gospel forward here!

For a while Paul spent most of his energy and time trying to convince the Jews in Corinth that Jesus was really and truly the long-awaited Messiah.

But after he saw that they were going to reject the message, he turned away *from* them and *to* the Gentiles to share the Gospel.

² Claudius issued this decree because of the civil disturbances over "Chrestus" (likely a misspelling of Christ.) The debate over Jesus had caused riots in the city, that is, about whether or not Jesus was the Messiah. (AD 49)

³ This was his habit throughout his ministry. 1 Corinthians 4:12 - Paul worked with his own hands so as to avoid being a burden to others. (also 1 Thessalonians 2:9)

Rejected by & rejects the Jews (18:6)

[6] But when they resisted and blasphemed, he shook out his garments and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.”

As Luke goes on to tell us, Paul’s evangelistic efforts were having great success in both the Jewish and Gentile worlds!

Corinthian Fruit (18:7-11)

Conversions in Corinth (18:7-8)

[7] Then he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God, whose house was next to the synagogue. [8] Crispus, the leader of the synagogue,⁴ believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized.

Only two of the Corinthians converts are named, but many responded to the message by trusting in Jesus. Things were going great in Corinth.

Now, Paul’s normal pattern, established on his missionary journeys to this point, was to march into a city, preach the Gospel, make disciples, organize the disciples into a church - and then move on to the next town.

Well, God had other plans for Paul in Corinth.

Stick around a while, Paul... (18:9-11)

The Lord’s encouragement to stay in Corinth

[9] And the Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, “Do not be afraid any longer (had Paul - PAUL!! - been afraid?), but go on speaking and do not be silent; [10] for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city.”

Can you imagine how that message must have encouraged Paul? It would have been music to his ears. Hearing what Jesus promised him, he settled in for a nice, long stay in Corinth.

Paul stayed there for eighteen months!

[11] And he settled there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

As we heard in Bill Logozzo’s wonderful Care Group testimony a few weeks ago, it doesn’t take years and years to make a difference in someone’s life.

When we are committed to maximizing opportunities, a few months will do the trick. Six months, a year, a year and a half - that is plenty of time to get to know people well.

It’s long enough to bond with people and to establish deep ties. In the words of our church’s Mission Statement, it is long enough to enjoy “*life-changing relationships.*”

Just think how well you could get to know people, how well you could serve them, how meaningfully you could impact them in a few months if you gave yourself to full engagement.

For the Apostle Paul, a year and a half was enough time to bond deeply with people and to plant the word of God into people’s souls.

I’m sure that those eighteen months were incredibly rich months of engagement, relating, loving, admonition, encouraging, praying, and learning.

Sadly, Paul’s time in Corinth came to an end before he might have chosen to leave, due to opposition from the Jewish population in the city.

⁴ Paul baptized Crispus (See 1 Corinthians 1:14).

Corinthian Challenge (18:12-17)

[12] But while Gallio⁵ was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul and brought him before the judgment seat,⁶ [13] saying, “This man persuades men to worship God contrary to the law.” [14] But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, “If it were a matter of wrong or of vicious crime, O Jews, it would be reasonable for me to put up with you; [15] but if there are questions about words and names and your own law, look after it yourselves; I am unwilling to be a judge of these matters.”⁷ [16] And he drove them away from the judgment seat. [17] And they all took hold of Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue, and began beating him in front of the judgment seat. But Gallio was not concerned about any of these things.

The Jews in Corinth were united in opposing Paul’s message. They saw the Jesus movement as opposing the Law of Moses. Sadly, they never saw that Jesus fulfilled Moses. They were angry with Paul and they wanted Gallio (the governor of the province) to tell Paul to stop preaching Jesus!

Gallio responded with a yawn. The matter seemed to him nothing more than a squabble over fine points of Jewish theology and he couldn’t have cared less.⁸

His apathy over the whole situation is highlighted when he does nothing to stop the beating of Sosthenes⁹ (another synagogue leader who had become a Christian), a beating that was taking place right in front of his judgment seat!

⁵ Gallio is a Roman proconsul we know a lot about from secular history. He was the son of Seneca the Elder (a well-known orator) and older brother of Seneca the younger (a philosopher). He was known to be anti-Semitic and described the Jews as an accursed race. He believed that Jews held to barbaric superstitions.

⁶ The *bema* was an elevated judgment seat - 7 ½ feet high.

⁷ Rome, as a matter of state policy, did not meddle in matters of religious practice by a particular group other than to determine whether a religion was legitimate and not contrary to state interests.

⁸ We “get” how he might not have “gotten” the distinction between Judaism and Christianity. To a Roman, the differences between the two probably appeared less substantial than their similarities.

⁹ Sosthenes (see 1 Corinthians 1:1; same name and probably the same man) was a ruler of the Jewish synagogue, and evidently a recent convert to the faith.

Gallio’s lack of involvement here doesn’t give us a very flattering picture of Roman rule. But it did give Paul the pretty clear sense that eighteen months was about the maximum he would be staying in Corinth.

When things had died down after the near riot, Paul made plans to leave Corinth and head to Syria.

Syria is home. Syria is where Antioch, his home church and his best friends are. Paul can’t wait to get home to Syria!

On the road, again... - Paul Leaves Corinth for Syria (18:18-21)

[18] Paul, having remained many days longer, took leave of the brethren and put out to sea for Syria, and with him were Priscilla and Aquila. In Cenchrea he had his hair cut, for he was keeping a vow. [19] They came to Ephesus, and he left them there. Now he himself entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. [20] When they asked him to stay for a longer time, he did not consent, [21] but taking leave of them and saying, “I will return to you again if God wills,” he set sail from Ephesus.

There are details given here they may strike you as odd. For instance, why mention Paul’s haircut? Well this is not a comment about his grooming. (I remember an exam on a test in seminary with the question, “Where did Paul get his hair cut?” Sheesh...)

The point is that when Jews of the first century took a vow of some kind, they would mark the beginning of the period of their vow with a haircut. And this, taking a vow, is what Paul’s haircut in Cenchrea was all about.¹⁰

(and isn’t it interesting that although Paul has argued that Gentiles don’t need to become Jewish to be Christians, he himself, a Jew, continues to follow Jewish customs. Paul never stopped embracing his own Jewishness. And there is nothing wrong with embracing cultural distinctives.)

¹⁰ We don’t know what sort of a vow it was. Some think it was a Nazirite vow (abstain from alcohol and uncleanness). But it is just as likely to have been a more personal matter.

If the haircut detail seems somewhat trivial, a detail that is NOT trivial is that he traveled with the couple who had made all the difference for him in Corinth, now referred to as Priscilla and Aquila.¹¹

On the way back to Syria, they stopped off for a very brief visit in the major city of Ephesus, leaving with a promise to return **“if God wills.”**

Paul left Priscilla and Aquila there, and then the remainder of the journey - the last leg of the Second Missionary Journey - is summed up in one jam-packed sentence.

[22] When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and went down to Antioch.

He landed at the port city of Caesarea, traveled to Jerusalem to greet the church there (**“he went up and greeted the church”** indicates a trip to Jerusalem), and then went down (down in elevation) to Antioch.

And that wraps up Missionary Journey #2. And we’re not finished. Paul wasn’t one to let grass grow under his feet before he decides to leave on Missionary Journey #3!

In the time that remains today we’re only going to look at the first major event on this journey, but it is one that highlights the main point I’m driving at today.

It is clear from a later passage that at least two other men, Timothy and Erastus, accompanied Paul on this journey. Leaving Antioch together, they passed through familiar territory.

Paul Begins the Third Missionary Journey (18:23--21:16)

Passes through Galatia (18:23)

[23] And having spent some time there, he left and passed successively through the Galatian region and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.

¹¹ Some have wondered if the change in name order reflects Priscilla’s more prominent role in Christian ministry. That would be my guess.

These are the areas he had already visited on the First Missionary Journey and where he and Barnabas had planted churches.

I’m sure that Paul renewed old friendships as he further taught and established the believers in the faith.

And while Paul and friends were traipsing around Galatia and Phrygia, Luke calls our attention to another man who is bringing the Gospel to a city Paul only visited briefly at the tail end of his Second Missionary Journey, the great city of Ephesus.

Parenthetical: Apollos instructed by Priscilla and Aquila (18:24-28)

[24] Now a Jew named Apollos, an Alexandrian by birth,¹² an eloquent man, came to Ephesus; and he was mighty in the Scriptures. [25] This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he was speaking and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus, being acquainted only with the baptism of John; [26] and he began to speak out boldly in the synagogue. But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. [27] And when he wanted to go across to Achaia, the brethren encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him; and when he had arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace, [28] for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, demonstrating by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.

This Apollos¹³ was a learned man, eloquent, and well-educated. He knew about God’s plan, was acquainted with the baptism of John, and knew that Jesus was the fulfillment of John’s preaching.

When Luke says that he had been instructed in **“the way of the Lord”** he means to say that Apollos was a Christian.¹⁴

¹² Alexandria (the city of Apollos’ birth) was well known for its educational opportunities and as a place for philosophical reflection, boasting one of the largest libraries in the world.

¹³ His more formal name would have been Apollonius.

¹⁴ Some believe that he was not a believer. But the way that Priscilla and Aquila treated him (as an equal who simply needed further instruction) leads me to believe that he was saved. As well, the statement that he spoke accurately about Jesus is not the kind of thing someone would likely say about the preaching of someone

But Apollos had not heard about Christian baptism. And my bet is that there were quite a few other things about life in Christ that Apollos didn't know.

He is a man caught in a transition between eras. He is a dedicated Jew. He is a believer in Jesus. Everything he has to say about Jesus is spot on. He's not mis-informed. He is just under-informed.

Well, who should show up in Ephesus but Paul's Corinthian partners, Priscilla and Aquila. (see Acts 18:19 - Paul dropped them off there as he traveled back to Antioch)

After hearing Apollos speak, they recognize giftedness, passion - and gaps in his understanding.

So, they sensitively pulled Apollos aside, filled in the gaps, and patiently explained to him what he didn't know about the Christian way.

I'm real impressed that Apollos accepted their baggage-free instruction without defensiveness.

This is how the Body of Christ gets built up. This is how Christians grow and become more effective servants of Jesus.¹⁵ One takes another under their wing, mentors, disciples, trains, and releases them to serve at even deeper levels than before.

And Apollos has become so much more effective that **"the brethren"** (i.e. - the Christians in Ephesus) have no concerns about sending him to Achaia (that is, Corinth) to serve the church there. So, off he sailed across the Aegean Sea to do just that.¹⁶

As we watch Apollos' ship set sail for Corinth, we look north and east to see Paul - along with Timothy and Erastus - pulling into Ephesus from their travels through Galatia and Phrygia.

who didn't know the Lord. At a slightly later days, Paul certainly considered Apollos a colleague (See 1 Corinthians 1-4; especially 3:9)

¹⁵ It is interesting that there is no mention that Apollos was then baptized.

¹⁶ This section shows how growth can occur in the church. Priscilla and Aquila encourage and further instruct Apollos in his new ministry. Apollos is open to this further instruction. There is mutual cooperation and encouragement in pursuit of a theologically sound ministry.

Paul Lands in Ephesus (19:1-41)

The Holy Spirit in Ephesus (19:1-7)

[19:1] It happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the upper country and came to Ephesus,¹⁷ and found some disciples. [2] He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they said to him, "No, we have not even heard whether there is a Holy Spirit." [3] And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" And they said, "Into John's baptism." [4] Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus." [5] When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.¹⁸ [6] And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking with tongues¹⁹ and prophesying. [7] There were in all about twelve men.

This is very interesting.

Paul arrived in Ephesus - where Priscilla and Aquila and Apollos have just been active. He meets **"disciples"** in Ephesus.

These disciples have not yet received the Holy Spirit. It seems that they don't even know about the Holy Spirit.²⁰ These disciples were only baptized into John's baptism.

So, Paul brings them up to speed on the ministry of the Holy Spirit. He baptized them in the Name of Jesus. And then, when he laid his hands on them (likely for blessing), they received the Holy Spirit along with the ability to speak in tongues and to prophesy!²¹

¹⁷ Paul arrived at Ephesus via the Cayster River valley, rather than by way of Colossae and Laodicea.

¹⁸ This is the only case in Acts where people who have already been baptized are baptized (John's) again (in Jesus).

¹⁹ For those who are counting, this is the final mention of tongues in Acts.

²⁰ Or, better, they have not heard that the Holy Spirit has come. Any disciple of John the Baptist would have heard that there was a Holy Spirit. (See Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16; John 1:32-33.)

²¹ The gift shows that the Spirit has come into their lives, just as it did on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2), in Samaria (Acts 8) and at Cornelius' house (Acts 10).

What makes this an interesting case is that if these folks were already Christians, this marks the only time in the New Testament when believers in Jesus receive the Holy Spirit some time AFTER they are saved.

And there is much debate about whether these dozen or so men were Christians. So, were they Christians?

Until this week, I would have said, “No.” After looking at the passage more carefully, I’m inclined to say, “Probably.”

- For one, the Bible tells us that they are “*disciples*.” Just about everywhere in Acts, to call someone a *disciple* is to call him or her a Christian.²²
- For another thing, the group that sent Apollos from Ephesus across the Aegean Sea to Corinth was referred to as “*the brethren*.” It is almost certainly the same group that Paul meets here. And, in Acts, *brethren* almost always means “brothers and sisters in Christ.”

So, I’m saying that these Christians received the Holy Spirit POST-conversion. Well, yes.

Here is what we must understand about the book of Acts.

In Acts, Luke paints a picture of the program of God in transition. There are events that occur in Acts that are not normative. That is to say that just because something happened a certain way once in Acts doesn’t mean that this is the way God always works or that it is the way He works today.

This is a special case, a unique situation, where a group of (evidently) Gentiles have placed their faith in Jesus and are saved.

With the laying on of hands by the Apostle Paul they are welcomed into the Body of Christ by receiving the Holy Spirit.

At the same time, this event validated Paul’s ministry as being on an equal footing with Peter and John and the rest of the apostles, who saw the Spirit given when they laid hands on Cornelius (Peter) and in Samaria (John and others).

The bottom line, as Darrell Bock says in his commentary on Acts, “*We are caught in the special situation of a transition here.*”

Now, I’ve gone into this long-winded exploration of this little passage to show that Acts is not a theological treatise. It is a history book, showing what God did, but it is not a book that shows what God will always do.

From the rest of the New Testament it is abundantly clear that every Christian has received the Holy Spirit. Paul, who presided over this post-conversion reception of the Holy Spirit, wrote to the Romans and said that if you don’t have the Holy Spirit, you’re not a Christian! (Romans 8:9)

Today, we are not in that initial transition period in which the early church found itself. So there is no need to wait for, or pray for the Holy Spirit to come into our lives. For you who have placed your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, He is in your life!

So, Acts is not a theological textbook. Acts shows what God has done, but not necessarily what He will always do. But Acts is also something else...

Other sections of the New Testament will often describe what life in Christ is to be all about. For instance, the letters will teach us to “one another” each other. Acts will supplement that teaching by painting such a brilliant picture of that reality as it is fleshed out in living color and graphic detail, that we can’t miss it.

And that is exactly what our time in Acts this morning has done for us.

²² One possible exception would be Acts 9:25.

Conclusion:

As I mentioned at the beginning this morning, Paul's time in Athens represented an anomaly in his apostolic career. At no other point in his life as a Christian did he serve Jesus alone.

From Athens forward, he always served Jesus with others, in community. Paul's life was a teammate-filled life.

In the same way, you and I were made by God to serve Him together. So, here is a rather pointed question, asked with your best interests in mind AND with the progress of Jesus' kingdom work in mind:

Who are your teammates? And where is your Christian community?

- With whom do you serve Jesus? Paul served Jesus with Priscilla and Aquila.
- Who helps bear your load? Silas and Timothy helped shoulder Paul's load.
- Who are you nurturing in the faith? Paul nurtured those who had trusted Christ through his ministry. He was always looking for those younger in the faith to encourage and strengthen.
- Who is nurturing you in the faith? Apollos was a faithful and effective servant of Christ. He became more faithful and effective by the sensitive, caring nurture of Priscilla and Aquila.
- Who encourages you? Paul was encouraged by the "many people" God placed in Corinth.

In the New Testament, everything is relational.

Paul had **Timothy** and **Gaius** and **Aristarchus** and **Priscilla** and **Aquila** and **Luke** and **so many more**. With them he was energized and refreshed.

Do you have people, Christian teammates, in your life? Can you see how important the Encourager, the Nurturer, the Teammate would be if they were in your life?

Seeing it, are you willing to pursue such relationships? Starting today?

Without such brothers and sisters, none of us will long live for Jesus as we were designed to live. Without such teammates, the fire of zeal for Jesus will surely dim.

Jesus intends that we serve Him with all our hearts. Such service rarely happens when we are "lone ranger-ing" the Christian life. If we would be "on mission" we must be "in community."