

## Acts 18:1–19:20

### *Success and Opportunity for Paul*

From Athens Paul journeys to another great city of Greece—Corinth, where he is the guest of two Jewish refugees from Rome, Aquila and Priscilla. (When Luke later puts Priscilla’s name before Aquila’s, it suggests that she had become a leader of the Corinthian Christians—consistent with Luke’s emphasis upon the role of women in the early community.) While in their home, Paul practices his tentmaking trade (18:3, cf. 1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:7–8), though his work does not hinder his preaching in the Corinthian synagogue (18:4), particularly after the arrival of Silas and Timothy (with a gift? 2 Cor. 11:9; Phil. 4:15). Paul regards his tentmaking work as an opportunity for evangelization: “... You remember, brothers, our work and toil. It was while we were laboring night and day, in order not to burden any of you, that we proclaimed to you the gospel of God” (1 Thess. 2:9; author’s trans.). Christian witness is not only for the synagogue or place of Sunday worship.

When Corinthian Jews oppose him, Paul washes his hands of them, declaring that he is no longer responsible for their fate. Now, he will “go to the Gentiles” (18:6), moving in with a gentile God-fearer named Titius. This move is confirmed, not only by the conversion of the ruler of the synagogue but also, as is the custom of Acts, with a vision which reassures Paul that he is not alone because (1) “I am with you,” and (2) “I have many people in this city” (v. 10). Reassured by this promise of support from the Lord and the Lord’s people, Paul stays and teaches there for a year and a half (v. 11).

Eventually, Paul is dragged before the proconsul, Gallio, but Gallio judges the matter to be an internal Jewish problem and says, “I refuse to be a judge of these things” (18:15). The converted ruler of the synagogue is then beaten by a mob—whether by non-Jews or Jews, we are not told, and Gallio could not care less. Even the newest convert is vulnerable to the same persecution which afflicts the eldest apostles themselves. The promise of the vision to Paul (18:9–10) has been fulfilled, for he is allowed to continue his work. The prophecy-fulfillment scheme, so prominent throughout Acts, becomes even more frequent and obvious for the remainder of Acts—Luke’s way of instilling our confidence in the trustworthiness of the plans and purposes of God.

When Paul declares, “from now on I will go to the Gentiles,” it does not mean that he

no longer attempts to convert his fellow Jews or that he will cease going to the synagogue first. He is simply moving his base of operations in Corinth. Christianity is still a sect within Judaism—as even Gallio knows. The new movement must not be severed from its roots, as Paul’s vow in conformity with ancient tradition shows. The claims of Christians make sense for Luke (and for us?) only within the context of the hopes of Israel.

In Ephesus, Paul repeats his pattern in Corinth of going first to the synagogue (18:19) but then moving on. This journey gives Luke the opportunity to let Paul instruct us on the nature of *Christian baptism* (18:25–19:5). It seems that one Apollos—described in glowing terms as “eloquent,” “well versed in the scriptures,” “fervent in spirit,” “accurate”—having every possible Lukan attribute of the ideal disciple, lacked one thing: he had never heard of Jesus’ baptism, knowing only the baptism of John (18:25). Priscilla and Aquila sought to set Apollos straight (demonstrating that the strictures against women preachers and teachers in 1 Tim. 2:12 did not hold for all churches). Like John the Baptist, Apollos “confuted the Jews in public” through Scripture (18:28). Yet when Paul encounters Apollos’ converts, he is shocked that they say, “we have never even heard that there is a Holy Spirit” (19:2). He baptized them and laid on hands that they might receive the Spirit. Paul explains that John’s baptism, like John’s ministry as a whole, was concerned with preparation for the one who came after him, the one whose presence would signal the new age of the Spirit (Luke 3:16). The descent of the Spirit at Jesus’ baptism (Luke 3:21–22) added a significant new dimension to John’s preparatory baptism of repentance—the Spirit. “When Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, as a dove ... (Luke 3:21–22). At Pentecost (Acts 2) the Spirit descended upon all of Jesus’ followers, signaling that the long-awaited age of the Spirit is now.

Later commentators who saw in this story of Apollos’ baptism an affirmation of *two* baptisms—that is, baptism in water followed by baptism of the Holy Spirit—misread Luke’s intentions. In the only instance of “rebaptism” in the New Testament, Paul baptizes Apollos’ people in Jesus’ name *in order that they should receive the Holy Spirit*. It would have been inconceivable to Luke that someone could be “in” Jesus and not be also “in” his Spirit. Baptism “in the name of Jesus” is baptism in the Holy Spirit. In a sense, two baptisms are being reported here; (1) the baptism of repentance practiced by John,

which is preparatory and preliminary, and (2) the baptism of Jesus, which is with water and the Holy Spirit and is a sign that one has been initiated into the new age. Luke would not have understood any conception of discipleship without the Spirit. The Spirit, as Paul assures the followers of Apollos, is not optional equipment for Christians, not some advanced degree which separates “Spirit-filled Christians” from the run-of-the-mill nonspiritual Christian proletariat. By virtue of baptism in the name of Jesus and laying-on-of-hands, all Christians are “charismatic” (19:6).

Lest anyone think that the power bestowed through the gift of the Spirit is mere magic, Luke inserts a vignette about “extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul” (19:11–20). Paul is so close to this healing power that even bits of clothing which touch his body effect healing. Assuming that his power is a sort of magic, some itinerant Jewish exorcists attempt to invoke the name of Jesus to heal. “Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?” asks the evil spirit who then jumps upon them and they flee naked away (19:15–17). While Luke considers magic to be a serious issue, he is not above treating it in a comical way. The healing power of Paul is no commodity to be seized and used (cf. the discussion of magic and Simon Magus in 8:18–23), not some miraculous force to be channeled at will. *Power* is part of a relationship with the Lord *who is personally known by the believer*. Seeing their black arts, astrology, and voodoo thus derided, once superstitious Jews and Greeks forsake their foolishness; and again, “the word of the Lord grew and prevailed mightily” (19:20), but not without the careful teaching and nurture of leaders like Priscilla, Aquila, and Paul. This faith is not simply about conversion nor is it only about wonder-working power; it is conversion into and power derived from a relationship with the risen Christ. No muddle-headed enthusiast, saying “It doesn’t really matter what you believe as long as you are sincere,” Luke insists upon correct belief and careful nurture of new converts.