

# ACTS—WEEK 17

## A GROWING CHURCH



F. Michael Slay  
*A DEEP Study*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

*The Cover Picture is “Paul in Athens” by Raphael (1483–1520),  
on display at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.*

Plot twists and turns dominate as Christianity continues to grow. Opposition continues, but Paul and his companions encounter a different and interesting problem—believers who have an incomplete understanding of the gospel.

Paul’s ministry evolves in response to those challenges, and he finally gives up on preaching in synagogues.

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We are a spiritual fellowship patterned after the Celtic Revival. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

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Thank you.

Acts 18:7–19:10 — A Growing Church  
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1 Acts 18:7–17 (ESV)

*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. 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.*

There’s an epilogue to this incident in 1 Corinthians 1:1.

*Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, (ESV)*

Could this possibly be the same Sosthenes?

All the evidence says yes. The “attitude adjustment” he received isn’t my favorite evangelistic method, but in this case, it was just the ticket. And note that he didn’t merely convert; he became enough of an asset to get mentioned in Paul’s first letter to Corinth.

There are many unanswered questions here. Who beat Sosthenes? Why were they so upset with him? Why did they beat him in front of the tribunal, and does that have special significance? How did this open him up to the gospel? The list is long and devoid of answers.

But none of that matters. What matters is that God called Sosthenes to Himself. Just as with Paul, his conversion was painful and dramatic. And, just as with Paul, he was called to a major role.

Funny how things work out that way.

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What kind of Christian do you want to be? Do you want to be a major player, with a lot of trials and a lot of impact? Or would you rather live quietly, serving the Lord faithfully in some minor capacity?

It’s not your choice. If “Lord” means Lord, then it’s His call. You can ask for a particular assignment, but you have to go with His decision, regardless of what it is. If you don’t, then He’s not really your Lord.

Most of us are afraid that if we really open the door, God might send us to Siberia or something.

He might, but only if that’s the right place. He’s good at His job, you know.

2 Acts 18:18–23 (ESV)

*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. At Cenchreae he had cut his hair, for 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 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.*

The vow Paul was under appears to be a Nazirite vow.

*When either a man or a woman makes a special vow, the vow of a Nazirite, ... All the days of his vow of separation, no razor shall touch his head. Until the time is completed for which he separates himself to the LORD, he shall be holy. He shall let the locks of hair of his head grow long. ... And this is the law for the Nazirite, when the time of his separation has been completed: he shall be brought to the entrance of the tent of meeting, and he shall bring his gift to the LORD — Numbers 6:2b, 5, 13–14a (ESV)*

To complete his vow, Paul needs to offer a sacrifice at the temple in Jerusalem. You can almost feel this hanging over him in the verses between now and when he gets there.

*Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, “After I have been there, I must also see Rome.” — Acts 19:21 (ESV)*

It’s interesting that Luke treats this vow almost as a secret. The only mention is, “*At Cenchreae he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow.*” That makes sense, in light of Matthew 6:5-6

*And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

Vows aren’t for show.

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It is good to praise someone when they’ve done something well—and it feels good to be praised—but there’s a fine line there that we need to be aware of. The praise is healthy, but our reaction sometimes isn’t.

We mustn’t crave that praise, and we mustn’t resent it when it’s lacking. Jesus tells us how to battle this emotion—hide your works.

Keep your works and gifts to the church and other charities secret. For example, when you say grace in a restaurant, be discrete.

3 Acts 18:24–28 (NKJV)

*Now a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures, came to Ephesus. This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord, though he knew only the baptism of John. So he began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Aquila and Priscilla heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. And when he desired to cross to Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him; and when he arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace; for he vigorously refuted the Jews publicly, showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ.*

How could Apollos be knowledgeable enough that *he spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord*, and yet *he knew only the baptism of John*?

That’s the way life was before the invention of the printing press. News was delivered by word-of-mouth, and if you wanted to know more there were few ways to look things up. The main thing you could do was ask somebody. If the people who taught Apollos about Jesus simply didn’t get to the lesson on Christian baptism, then Apollos would have that hole in his knowledge—and that might not be the only one. What he was teaching wasn’t wrong—*he spoke and taught accurately*—it was just incomplete.

This is ironic since Apollos was from Alexandria, a city famous for its library. For most subjects, Apollos was able to look things up, which he apparently often did. Thus, he was unusually knowledgeable.

But Christianity was new and there were no books on it (yet), so the usual word-of-mouth limitation was absolute. Apollos was only able to research the Old Testament. As a result, he was *mighty in the Scriptures*, but was less informed about current events.

To his credit, he seems to react well to the correction from Priscilla and Aquila when *they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately*. Luke doesn’t even record his reaction.

They filled the holes in his understanding, and he just keeps on with his ministry without missing a beat.

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Every one of us is surely wrong or ignorant about something (okay, lots of things.) Part of growing in Christ is discovering our errors and learning.

But our fallen human nature resists this. In school, being wrong generally means being downgraded. Even the words, “I don’t know,” are shameful. Thus, it’s unusual for someone to be comfortable with not knowing something—or even being wrong. Yet that is our goal.

One of the beauties of the gospel is that we admit that we’re a mess. We even embrace our messiness. When we accept Jesus Christ as Lord, we are relieved of the punishment for that, but the errors persist. Ask the Lord to point out one of your errors. Pray that he will make this clear. Be it major or minor, resolve to not be in denial.

*If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.* — 1 John 1:10 (ESV)

4 Acts 19:1–7 (ESV)

*And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. And he said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they said, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” And he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They said, “Into John's baptism.” And Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.” On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. There were about twelve men in all.*

This time, it's Paul who encounters someone with an incomplete knowledge of the gospel (actually, twelve someones). This case isn't identical to what happened with Apollos, but the theme is the same.

There were many folks who had heard part of the gospel. Paul's job wasn't always to teach the gospel from scratch; many folks have a partial, or even false, understanding of Christ already.

In both cases, the students have a fairly good partial understanding. Apollos *spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord*. Today's group is called “*disciples*.” Yet they've all only heard of John's baptism.

Now consider the differences. The Holy Spirit isn't mentioned in Apollos's case, but here it's Paul's main concern. His first question is, “*Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?*” It turns out that not only have they not received the Holy Spirit, they *have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit*. (That is, they didn't know about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost; they weren't referring to Old Testament examples.) When Paul hears this he follows up with, “*Into what then were you baptized?*” He then acts on the answer.

Notice the evangelistic method used in both of these cases. The key is learning what the student believes (by listening in yesterday's passage, by questioning in today's) and then addressing any deficiencies.

Frankly, this is how it should always be done.

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Do you have a friend or loved one who has resisted becoming a believer? When you think about the next time you'll see them, do you think about how you will present the gospel? That's not the next step.

How well do you know what they think? What's their main objection? What do they believe? Why do they believe that? If you don't know, find out. Let them teach you how to teach them.

Ask the Lord to help you be a better “listening evangelist.” Ask God to give you the right questions to ask.

Don't forget to pray for patience either. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you loving responses.

Canned evangelistic presentations can be downright disrespectful.

5 Acts 19:8–10 (ESV)

*And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.*

Here we go again; Paul's back in the synagogue. Despite all the troubles he has had in them, he just can't seem to keep away. They're his home field; he always goes there first, then elsewhere if he has to.

But no more. This is the end of Paul teaching in the synagogues. After this incident, Luke never again records Paul entering a synagogue. He has finally given up on trying to teach there.

But he doesn't announce that he's quitting, like he did in Corinth.

*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." — Acts 18:6*

That time, he didn't give up on the Jews, even though he said he would. This time he does—at least in terms of going into their synagogues. Why? What's different about this time?

First off, this time his opponents aren't just critical of Paul; they're *speaking evil of the Way*. Getting beaten and thrown into prison is one thing, but hearing people *speaking evil of the Way* is quite another. That may have tripped Paul's wire.

But there's another explanation that's curiously ironic. Because the opposition wasn't all that severe—it didn't get violent—Paul was able to stay in town for a long time. *He withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.* Maybe, after *two years*, he simply got used to *reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus*.

He didn't decide that Tyrannus was a better venue than the synagogue; he learned that it was.

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The business of Christ is the business of change. Sometimes that change comes suddenly, with a great epiphany, but some change comes so gradually we don't even notice it until we look back.

Take a look back. Where were you one year ago? Who were you one year ago? What were your plans and goals? Did they pan out? Or did God change everything? Did you grow?

Don't just think about these questions; answer them. Rate your walk with the Lord. Then spend some time planning your next steps.

Ask God to show you where He wants you to grow.

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. Have you ever felt a tug toward some great commitment and suppressed it?
2. Are you okay with never getting praised for the things you do for Christ?
3. Does it irritate you when people refuse to admit they're wrong?
4. Why do people not believe? What is their main stumbling block?
5. How have you changed in the last year?