

Christ The Builder



A Sermon on Acts 18.9-11

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Acts 18.9-11

The world is a visual place. The world makes our eyes busy. Videos, commercials, billboards – all these things stimulate and excite the eye. We live in a “seeing” culture where seeing is believing. Images flash before our eyes on TV like lightning; computer icons and ads try to make you look and click. However, the Christian faith is different. It is *not* seeing to believe. The gospel is *not* something that stimulates our eyes. The eye is almost at rest in the Christian faith. The gospel is not “seeing is believing” but “hearing is believing.” The church is a place for the ears.

The text we just read is part of the Acts-story that highlights speaking/hearing, not seeing. Remember from the sermons on Acts that you have already heard – how the whole book is really about Jesus’ saving word going forth to the ends of the earth. Chapter 18.9-11 is part of a bigger story, a story of the building of Jesus’ church. And simply put, that’s what these verses are about. The main point of these verses is this: *through his word, Christ builds his church*. Christ is the one who drives the story along and takes the initiatives that lead to the expansion of the church. Notice how Jesus builds his church – through Paul – in three ways. First, he builds the church with his commanding word, as verse nine shows. Then, the story tells us how he builds his church with his encouraging word (verse 10). Finally, Jesus builds his church with his proclaimed word, as verse 11 tells us.

Perhaps you have already noticed that *Jesus* and *his word* are central to the whole enterprise. Don’t miss that point! Jesus is on the throne as the great builder of his church—all authority has been given to him in heaven and on earth. Thus, his apostles receive the commission to go

to the ends of the earth with the gospel. Jesus is on the throne as a builder of his church—he builds his church with his commanding word.

Jesus' Commanding Word (v. 9)

In verse nine, Christ speaks to Paul in a vision. He's in the bustling city of Corinth, a trade-center, a busy city not too different than San Diego, perhaps. In Corinth, Paul met Aquilla and Priscilla, who would remain his brother and sister in Christ for years. While preaching in Corinth, the Jews there fought against him, hating the word that he preached – hating the gospel that he preached. Their opposition led Paul to tell them, “Fine! You reject this gospel – the blood is on your own heads. I told you about Christ, and you said no to him; it's your own fault!”

This must have shaken Paul up a bit. A few years after this, Paul wrote a letter to this church (1 Corinthians), where he reminded them that he preached to them in “weakness and fear and trembling.” Paul was no doubt discouraged, afraid, and ready to run away or just give up.

Then the vision. Then Christ appears to his desponded disciple and apostle, his servant. We know nothing of this vision, except that it happens at night. In the dark of night, perhaps awaking Paul, Jesus appeared and spoke to the apostle. What is important here is not what Paul sees, but what he hears. Luke, the author of Acts, makes us listen and hear, not see with Paul. We're hearing from Paul's point of view, not seeing from it.

With three commands, the Lord of the church speaks to an apostle of the church. *Stop being afraid, Paul* (verse 9)! Paul probably thought about the Lord's command to Joshua (Joshua 1.9) or maybe his command to Jeremiah (1.8). The Lord's servants throughout history have been afraid in the face of danger, distress, or death. So the risen and glorified Christ – the Christ who is in heaven in body and

soul – speaks a word to Paul: do not fear, stop being afraid of those here who hate the gospel. *Keep on speaking!* Though you're afraid, preach on, Paul! Keep speaking! Sound waves must keep going out of your mouth; you cannot stop vocalizing the gospel here. Keep on telling people about me!

Christ's commanding words continue: *do not keep silent!* Again, like God's words to his people in the past – especially the prophets, the Lord says, "Cry aloud! Speak my words!" Paul, how can anyone in Corinth believe in whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without someone speaking or preaching? You see, Paul soon comes to realize that without gospel preaching, there can be no faith. These words of Jesus must ring aloud in Paul's ears to his death, even when he's in chains in prison – even when he's being persecuted later in life, he never stops telling people about the Savior who lived and died to save sinners. And it's Jesus' powerful commanding word that works: his word accomplishes its purpose. Jesus' Spirit-driven voice makes Paul go and preach.

What about us? Though we haven't seen Christ like Paul has, we've *heard* him in the preached word, right? Because Paul did not keep silent, because Jesus' commanding word is powerful, we have heard this very word, the sound that hits your eardrums: believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved. In the midst of a noisy world, bustling and busy cities – like Corinth or San Deigo or Des Moines or Jacksonville – in the midst of a world with so many glittering things to see, on the Lord's day we stop. We stop what we've been doing all week to listen to Christ.

We pause; we let our eyes rest as it were and open our ears wide to the voice of Christ. We need this external word, we need a word from the outside to save us from a world that wants to stimulate our eyes and drown out the

voice of Christ. The sound of the gospel, the sound waves of a pastor giving the absolving words, “If you’ve trusted in Christ, your sins are completely forgiven,” this sound breaks through the noisy world and reminds us that Jesus saves. Jesus builds his church. The sound of Jesus’ voice draws us out of ourselves and out of this busy world to the source of the sound – Jesus on the throne commanding and comforting his church. Christ builds his church by the command to Paul and by comforting his church.

Jesus’ Encouraging Word

Notice in this story that Jesus does more than command. He comforts as well—notice verse 10. He shouts in Paul’s ears, “*I am with you!*” He shouts in Paul’s ears not to confound Paul but to comfort him. And what is the sound of comfort? The Abrahamic promise: I am with you, I will bless you, I am your God. Here in this Acts-story, God’s Genesis 15-17 promise to Abraham is being fulfilled. Do not fear, Abraham, do not fear, Paul, I am with you, I will multiply your offspring, I will be your God forever. These are covenant of grace sounds.

And again, we’re reminded of Yahweh’s comforting word to the prophets: I am with you! When you go to the stubborn, Mosaic-covenant breaking people of Israel, don’t worry, I am with you! God also speaks these words in the New Testament era. Remember the Great Commission in Matthew 28? “Go ye therefore and make disciples of all nations...teaching them,” and so forth. Jesus said in the Great Commission, “Lo, *I am with you* always, even to the ends of the age.” God’s gracious Abrahamic covenant promise is repeated to a frightened Paul in Corinth around 50 AD.

These are words of life, aren’t they? Paul will never be without his Savior; his Savior will never be without Paul. *I am with you* are also words for you, you who have received

Christ and rest in him, you who trust in him for salvation from sin and death. Jesus says to you *right now* – I am with you, my beloved! Jesus was with his prophets and his apostles, and he is always with his church. This is a comforting word of Christ, encouragement for the church like Hebrews 13:5, where the Lord swears an oath: never will I leave you, never will I forsake you. This is what Immanuel means; God is with us; the gates of hell will never prevail over the church.

One commentator on Acts wrote about this passage. He said, “Calm confidence in the face of suffering springs from the assurance of our Defender’s presence with us.”¹ Dear Christian, remember when you walk through dark valleys that Jesus says to you, *I am with you*. Remember when your doctor tells you that the tumor has spread that Jesus says, *I am with you*. Church – elders – remember when you face people who distort the gospel and attack the church that Jesus says in your years, *I am with you*. Kids – Jesus speaks these words to you as well. Jesus never leaves his people!

Back to Corinth. Jesus continues speaking to Paul: *No one will harm you*. Of course, later in his life Paul was harmed, but on this occasion, Paul has a divine and comforting promise that he won’t be hurt here in Corinth. You might be opposed, but that opposition will not result in harm. “Paul,” says Jesus, “I know you faced some opposition and hatred here in Corinth for preaching me, but who has been given all authority? Who do you work for? Who is the head of the church? Who is the King of kings and Lord of Lords?” Who builds the church?

Christ speaks on, *I have many here who are my people*. Jesus speaks authoritative words, words of comfort to Paul. Many in Corinth are written in the book of life.

¹ Dennis Johnson, *The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1997), 224.
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Many here are elect, so Paul is assured that his work will not be in vain. Paul is promised that many will receive and rest in Christ. This is one of those places in the Bible where we learn a little about election. And what does “election” mean? Some who call themselves Reformed say that election can mean two things – elect into God’s covenant people and elect for eternal life. But that’s smashing too much meaning into one term. That’s not really how language works!

We say – Reformed theology says – that election means, “chosen for eternal life.” “My people” in verse eleven are the elect, those who belong to Christ, those who are written in the book of life. And there are not two kinds of election, as some so-called Reformed people have recently said. This passage is talking about those who have been granted salvation – not a salvation that can be somehow lost, but eternal salvation. The Canons of Dort are right on: Before the foundation of the world, God chose a definite number of people to be saved through Christ. And he decreed that he would call and draw them effectively into Christ’s fellowship through his Word and Spirit (CoD I.7). See how Paul goes to Corinth to preach, and God’s elect are brought into the fold of salvation? The same thing happens in chapter 13:48: God appointed some to eternal life. This eternal life is heaven, salvation, forgiveness, and so forth – anything less would hardly be comforting for Paul.

Today, election is one of those reasons why we go forth and preach the gospel to all nations, just like the Apostles were doing in Acts. We, unlike Paul, cannot tell if there are many elect in certain cities, but we leave it in the hands of Christ to bring home his people through hearing. Acts 1:8 is important: Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, ends of the earth – that’s how the gospel will go forth! To bring the Abrahamic

gracious promise into view again, his spiritual offspring are being brought in, and Yahweh is proven to be faithful to his gracious covenant promise. This family of believers is a truly international family!

And thus Jesus builds his church. Paul: be of good cheer: I am with you, you will not be harmed, and many in this very city will respond to your gospel preaching. I am building my church, says the Lord. It's still true today. We should continue to support mission work, we should continue to reach out to the lost even here in this city, we should continue to pray that Jesus would keep on building. To repeat: Christ is building his church with his commanding word, comforting word, and with his proclaimed word.

Jesus' Proclaimed Word (v11)

Remember, the word is central. Speaking and hearing is more important than seeing. The word "word" is used around 50 times in Acts relating to gospel preaching and teaching. Verse 11 of our text tells us that Paul stayed at Corinth for a year and a half teaching the *word* of God. And teaching here probably doesn't just mean in a classroom setting. It is broader, no doubt, it includes preaching – he says as much in 1 Corinthians 1-2. If you want to see that Paul preached *and* taught, read his two letters to the Corinthian Christians. It is clear that teaching accompanies preaching. And though we cannot go into it right now, this is why we still have catechism and Bible classes or studies here. We're listening to Christ by doing so.

What did Paul teach and preach in Corinth? "Jesus Christ and him crucified," Paul reminded them in 1 Corinthians 2. Paul knew the power of Christ's word – Jesus' word converted him, after all, on the Damascus road. Paul knew the power of the gospel, that Jesus lived

and died to save his elect. Paul knew that Jesus' death killed death and sin and hell, that Jesus' resurrection was the victory over sin; your sin and my sin are wiped out and canceled by resting in Christ's finished work. Paul knew that gospel so well. That gospel is the main point of all of his epistles in the NT – and really, all of Scripture.

I think it is also important here to point out that Paul didn't use the latest trends in Corinth to help him spread the gospel. He didn't hand out booklets of ten steps to build a bustling church. He didn't lure the Corinthian civilians by promising he would make them feel at home and give them a hot cup of designer coffee before the service. Actually, he used something that the world calls foolish and weak, stupid and crazy. He says this in his first letter to the Corinthians, that the gospel is foolishness and a stumbling block, that preaching the word is considered a stupid thing by the world. The situation is the same today, isn't it? Other churches criticize us for "just preaching."

I also want to point out that preaching and teaching the gospel is commanded by Christ. It is not up for grabs. We call preaching the gospel a mark of the church because Christ did. No preaching Christ, no church. You can have all the bells and whistles, the smoke and drums, the feelings and smiles, the health and wealth, the healing and spirituality, but if your church doesn't preach Christ, it is no church at all. Jesus commands Paul to teach the word – the word is not the word according to Corinth, or San Diego, or wherever, but the word of Christ, the gospel.

Luther called the church a "mouth house." The Heidelberg Catechism says that God wants his people instructed by the *living* word. Through speaking, Jesus gathers his people. Through the word, Christ brings his sheep home. Paul comes to Corinth with the words of Christ, the very voice of Christ, and look what happens at

Corinth – people repent and believe the gospel! Jesus' told Paul the primary church growth method: preaching the gospel. Through the preached gospel, Jesus builds his church.

Through speaking – yes, sound waves through the air – Christ creates his church. Christ builds his church through vocal cords telling about Christ and eardrums receiving those sound waves. Christ built it in Acts and he'll build it here and across the world. Of course, the Spirit of God goes with it, doing the work. Here, with the text, we must stress the centrality of the *proclaimed word*. Just like at creation, the word goes forth creating. It creates faith, it creates the church, it creates comfort, it creates a people. The church is really, as the Reformers taught, a creature of the word! Beloved, this is as Reformed and biblical as it gets: grace and faith come through sound.

Conclusion

Believing is *hearing*, not seeing! Lots of churches will stimulate your eyes, lots of things will delight your eyes and ears, but not everything has been commanded by Christ. Not everything creates a people, creates faith. Christianity is all about speaking and hearing, about sound waves shaking your eardrums and by the power of the Spirit bringing new life according to Christ's command. The preached word is Christ's rock-splitting faith-creating heart-warming voice.

Today we too are a hearing people. By Christ's commanding word, by his encouraging word, by his proclaimed word, *Christ* is building his church – not pastors or elders or members with lots of money or skills. Christ's command for us is to preach, his word comes to comfort sinners in their terrors, like when you face broken hearts and persecution. Christ's word builds his church.

This is the gospel, dear church. The preached word swirling around creates and preserves. It tells you that Jesus is with you, and in life or death, sin and hell and Satan and the world will never prevail over you or the church. Let these words of Jesus echo in your ears: *I am with you. I am with you always.*

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