

Timelines: Gospel Conflicts, Pt. 1 - Corinth (Acts 20:1-3)

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Introduction

1. Three important details are set forth by Luke in the text that we are in danger of missing if we do not take a careful look.
 - a. The burden of Paul for the spiritual welfare of the churches, particularly Corinth (vv. 1-3)
 - b. The gospel invasion into the Gentile world and its glorious results (vv. 4-6)
 - c. The precision with which God authenticates His servants (vv. 7-12)
2. Why are some details omitted by Luke that are necessary to see the whole picture?
 - a. We tend to be lazy in spiritual matters.
 - b. We need to learn to ask questions in order to ascertain details.
 - c. We are to “study” to show ourselves approved unto God.
3. In this message we want to examine Acts 20:1-3.

I. Plans and Conflicts (1 Cor. 16:5-9)

1. According to 1 Cor. 5:9, Paul wrote a letter to the church at Corinth from Ephesus (third missionary journey).
 - a. They did not understand it; so they asked him to clarify 4 issues: marriage (7:1), meat offered to idols (8:1), the use of spiritual gifts (12:1), and the collection for the Jerusalem church (16:1).
 - b. Paul had also received alarming news about divisions within the congregation (1 Cor. 1:11).
 - c. Stephanas and Fortunatus gave him additional disturbing information (1 Cor. 16:17).
2. Prompted by these reports, Paul wrote First Corinthians (ca. 55), actually his *second* letter (1 Cor. 16:8), from Ephesus.
 - a. Paul states that he “sent” (Gk. *epémpsa*; or as others, “am sending”) Timothy to Corinth.
 - b. We do not know whether the letter preceded Timothy or if Timothy ever got to Corinth (see Acts 19:22).
3. He wrote Second Corinthians from Macedonia (ca. 56), his *fourth* letter to the church.
 - a. Does not deal with issues of the first letter, but more dangerous problems:
 - 1) Heretics trying to convert the church to Judaism
 - 2) Questioning Paul’s apostleship
 - b. Paul made a short “painful” visit to Corinth without result (implied in 2 Cor. 2:1, 2).
 - c. Then Paul sent a “severe letter” (vv. 3, 4), his *third* letter, delivered by Titus.

4. Because of these events, Paul changed his plans as outlined in 1 Cor. 16:5-9, travelled north to Troas (2 Cor. 2:12), and instructed Titus to meet him there.
 - a. When Titus did not show up as planned, Paul became very concerned and left for Macedonia.
 - b. He found Titus in Macedonia and learned that many of the problems were solved and that the church reaffirmed their love for Paul, welcoming his return to them.

II. Resolutions and Victory (2 Cor. 2:14)

1. Grace prevailed as Paul persevered through his 3-year struggle over the church, “triumphing *in Christ*” (2 Cor. 2:14).
 - a. The reaction to Paul’s ministry, as “the aroma of Christ,” was both negative (in those perishing) and positive (in those believing).
 - b. How could Paul (or anyone) do this (vv. 15-17)?
 - 1) By recognizing one’s place (“who is sufficient?”)
 - 2) By distancing oneself from “hawking Jesus”
 - 3) Recognizing one’s commission and “speaking in Christ”
2. God graciously brought a positive result (2 Cor. 3:1ff).
 - a. The triumph was by the power of God, not Paul’s politics (vv. 4-6).
 - b. Paul’s courage to keep on was found in his confidence in the gospel itself (4:1-3).
 - c. The process, however, was very difficult for the “flesh”; yet, God used the process to renew his servant spiritually (4:15-18).
3. Luke briefly details the results.
 - a. Paul, at last, came to “Greece”—Corinth—and was graciously welcomed after passing through Macedonia, “encouraging the believers.”
 - b. His company wintered in Corinth (three months) before leaving for Jerusalem with the offering they had received.
 - c. A plot of the Jews to kill Paul, again, altered their plans, and they returned through Macedonia.

Application

1. The book of Acts reveals that conflict is inevitable when the Kingdom of God invades man’s kingdom.
 - a. We live in a world that thinks and acts within the limited constraints of human alienation from God (Ephesians 4:17, 18).
 - b. The gospel is the power of God, confronting man, not at the level of his *doing* (sin), but of his *being* (sinner), whether Jew, pagan, or Christian.
 - c. We *do sin*, but that is not the problem. It is only a symptom of the problem—our estrangement.

d. The gospel is about the *person* of Jesus—not as an example to follow or an aid to help us live better—confronting us as an authentic human, revealing our pseudo-human orientation.

e. The gospel testifies that man, by birth and enslavement to self and sin, has no *resource, ability, or hope* to fix his predicament.

Yet the gospel obligates all to be just like Jesus—the true man.

f. For this reason, the gospel always provokes a “fight or flight” response in those who hear it.

1) Some *flee*—running away, or shutting down in disinterest or disgust.

2) Others *fight* back, attacking either the message as false or the messenger as evil.

3) This explains the hostility the gospel encountered by the Jews, the pagans, and the Corinthian church.

2. Three implications:

a. It is essential that we *understand* the gospel itself.

1) The gospel is not just the atonement or the forgiveness of sins.

2) Jesus became man in order to condemn mankind as *fallen* and *fraudulent* (Rom. 3:4).

3) Through both His life and cross-work, Jesus *liberates* and *restores* His own as new Adam—a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17).

4) The gospel thereby *reconciles* redeemed mankind to God (2 Cor. 5:18-21).

b. It is essential that we *present* the gospel correctly and completely.

1) In their estranged state, people always hear spiritual truth in terms of religion (*magic*) because of self-interest and self-reference.

2) When the gospel is corrupted or incomplete, the message leaves the hearer where it found him.

3) An incomplete gospel is a *false* gospel, confronting sinfulness but failing to address the sinners’ fraudulent and hopeless humanity.

c. The gauge by which we can evaluate our gospel presentation is by how the hearer reacts to it. The gospel always produces conflict.

This is what Paul teaches us.