

Homiletics Analysis: Acts 18

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Acts 18 narrates Paul's eighteen-month ministry in Corinth, the most extended stay recorded in his second missionary journey. The chapter opens with Paul's arrival in Corinth, his providential meeting with Aquila and Priscilla (recently expelled from Rome under Claudius's edict), and his tent-making partnership with them. Paul reasons in the synagogue every Sabbath, and when Silas and Timothy arrive from Macedonia, he intensifies his preaching, testifying that Jesus is the Christ. Jewish opposition forces a decisive break — Paul shakes out his garments and declares he will go to the Gentiles — yet the chapter immediately narrates that Crispus, the synagogue ruler, believes, along with his household, followed by many Corinthians. God then speaks directly to Paul in a night vision, commanding him to stay, not fear, and keep speaking — grounding this command in a sovereign promise: "I have many people in this city." Paul remains eighteen months. A Jewish accusation before Gallio the proconsul fails when Gallio dismisses it as an intra-Jewish religious dispute, refusing Roman jurisdiction. Paul then departs, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila, stops at Cenchreae (where he has taken a vow), visits Ephesus briefly, and leaves Priscilla and Aquila there. He returns to Antioch and embarks on his third missionary journey. The chapter closes with the arrival of Apollos in Ephesus — a gifted, scripturally learned man who knows only the baptism of John — and his private instruction by Priscilla and Aquila, followed by his fruitful ministry in Achaia, publicly refuting the Jews and demonstrating from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ.

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to produce in the reader a settled, unshakeable confidence that the advance of the gospel is not a human project requiring human courage, connections, or clever strategy, but a divine project driven by sovereign promise. Through the convergence of providential provision (Aquila and Priscilla), divine command (the night vision), legal protection (Gallio), and unexpected instruments (Apollos instructed by tentmakers), God is pressing the reader toward a specific theological conviction: *He has people in every city, and He will get them*. The intent is not merely informational but vocational — God is seeking to free His servants from paralyzing fear and self-reliant strategy so they will stay, speak, and trust the One who goes before them.

Subject Sentence: God's sovereign promise undergirds and outlasts every obstacle to the gospel's advance.

Primary Claim: God is assuring His servants that gospel ministry operates under sovereign divine promise — “I have many people in this city” — and calling them to remain, speak, and trust that promise rather than retreat in fear or calculate their own adequacy.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Night Vision and Divine Sovereignty (vv. 9–10)

The theological center of the chapter is the night vision in which the Lord commands Paul: “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.” The phrase “I have many people in this city” (Greek: *laos polys*) is the exegetical crux. Does it mean God *foresees* many who will believe, or that God has *elected* many who will come to faith? The Arminian/Wesleyan tradition reads this as divine foreknowledge of those who *will* respond, preserving the primacy of human decision. The Reformed reading recognizes *laos* as a loaded covenantal term — the word for God’s covenant people (LXX usage throughout) — indicating that those who will believe in Corinth are already God’s people by election, and Paul’s preaching is the appointed means by which they will be gathered. This reading is preferred because: (1) the phrase functions as a *warrant*, not merely an encouragement — God is not predicting probable outcomes but grounding a promise in a sovereign claim; (2) the Lukan pattern of Acts consistently frames gospel reception as God’s opening of hearts (Acts 13:48; 16:14) rather than human initiative; (3) the Greek *laos* in Luke-Acts specifically echoes the covenantal people-language of the Old Testament, implying prior divine ownership. The Arminian reading collapses the force of the promise — if God is merely predicting what people *might* do, the comfort is proportional only to God’s accuracy as a forecaster, not to His sovereignty as Lord. The Reformed reading preserves the full weight of the divine warrant: Paul stays not because the odds look good, but because the sovereign God has already claimed these people.

The Gallio Episode and Common Grace / Political Providence (vv. 12–17)

Some traditions (particularly those with a strong church/state separation theology) read the Gallio episode as a morally neutral accident of history — Paul happened to benefit from a pagan official’s disinterest. The Reformed reading sees Gallio’s dismissal as providential governance: God uses a secular official’s jurisdictional reasoning as a structural protection for the early church’s freedom to operate. This does not require Gallio to be acting consciously in service of the gospel — it requires only that God governs magistrates (Romans 13:1; Proverbs 21:1) and orchestrates even pagan legal reasoning for redemptive purposes. The beating of Sosthenes (v. 17) — and Gallio’s indifference to it — is exegetically contested: Is Sosthenes the same Sosthenes mentioned in 1 Corinthians 1:1 as Paul’s “brother”? If so, this bruised synagogue ruler later comes to faith, which

would be a subtle Lukan irony. This identification is plausible but uncertain; it should not carry significant homiletical weight without acknowledgment of its uncertainty.

The Apollos Instruction and Lay Ministry / Gender (vv. 24–28)

The instruction of Apollos by Priscilla and Aquila generates two ongoing interpretive discussions. First, gender: Priscilla is named first in most ancient manuscripts (v. 26 — “Priscilla and Aquila explained to him the way of God more accurately”), which many scholars take as indicating she was the more prominent teacher. Egalitarians use this to support women’s authority to instruct men in Scripture. The Reformed complementarian reading notes that this was private instruction (*pros heauton* — “they took him aside”), not public teaching or authoritative church instruction; that married couples instructing a visitor privately is categorically different from a woman holding the office of teacher or elder in the congregation; and that Priscilla’s role is honored precisely within the framework of her partnership with her husband. This reading does not diminish Priscilla’s evident competence or the legitimacy of her contribution — it contextualizes the mode of her instruction. Second, the “baptism of John” gap in Apollos: this is not a deficiency of character or sincerity but a catechetical gap — he knew the Scriptures thoroughly, taught accurately about Jesus, and burned with Spirit-activated zeal, but his knowledge of the full Pentecostal fulfillment was incomplete. Priscilla and Aquila’s correction is a model of charitable, private, precise doctrinal instruction — neither public shaming nor doctrinal silence.

Key Canonical Support

- **Acts 13:48** — “As many as were appointed to eternal life believed” — the Lukan framework of election undergirding gospel reception, directly illuminating the “I have many people in this city” promise.
- **Isaiah 43:1–7** — “I have called you by name; you are mine... I will bring your offspring from the east... everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory” — the Old Testament covenantal ground for the language of “my people,” showing that the Lord’s claim over specific people precedes their gathering.
- **Romans 8:28–30** — The golden chain of redemption (foreknown → predestined → called → justified → glorified) provides the theological architecture for why divine promise-grounded ministry is not futile — those God has purposed are those who will come.
- **Proverbs 21:1** — “The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will” — grounds the Gallio episode within the broader canonical teaching that God governs magistrates for His purposes.
- **1 Corinthians 1:26–31** — Written to the very church planted in this chapter, Paul’s reminder that God chose the foolish, weak, and low to shame the strong — a direct

theological reflection on how God assembled the Corinthian congregation, consistent with the “I have many people” promise.

Aim: To demonstrate from Acts 18 that gospel ministry is grounded in divine sovereign promise — not human adequacy — and to call ministers and believers to stay, speak, and work without fear, trusting the God who already owns the harvest He has appointed.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	Paul arrives in Corinth; meets Aquila and Priscilla, Jewish tentmakers recently expelled from Rome under Claudius	Claudius’s edict (c. AD 49) is independently attested; providential timing is implicit
3	Paul stays and works with them as tentmakers, sharing their trade	Paul’s self-support model; later becomes a point of controversy in Corinth (1 Cor 9)
4	Paul reasons in the synagogue every Sabbath, persuading both Jews and Greeks	Standard Pauline synagogue entry point
5	Silas and Timothy arrive from Macedonia; Paul devotes himself entirely to preaching, testifying Jesus is the Christ	Their arrival may bring financial support (2 Cor 11:8–9), freeing Paul from tent-making
6	Jewish opposition and blasphemy; Paul shakes out his garments — “your blood be on your own heads” — declares he will go to the Gentiles	Prophetic gesture (Ezekiel 33); decisive break from synagogue; shifts responsibility
7	Paul moves to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God, next door to the synagogue	Provocative geography — the mission base is literally adjacent to the opposition
8	Crispus, the synagogue ruler, believes with his	The synagogue ruler’s conversion is a dramatic

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	whole household; many Corinthians hear, believe, and are baptized	reversal; “many” echoes v. 10’s promise
9–10	Night vision: the Lord commands Paul not to fear, to keep speaking, not to be silent; grounds it in three promises: divine presence, personal protection, and sovereign election — “I have many people in this city”	Theological center of the chapter; “laos polys” — covenantal people-language
11	Paul remains in Corinth eighteen months, teaching the word of God	Longest recorded stay in his missionary journeys to this point
12–13	Gallio becomes proconsul of Achaia; Jews bring Paul before his tribunal, accusing him of persuading people to worship contrary to the law	Gallio’s tenure (c. AD 51–52) is historically datable; this is a legal attempt to stop the mission
14–15	Before Paul can speak, Gallio rules the matter intra-Jewish — not a crime deserving Roman attention	Providence: a secular official’s legal reasoning becomes a structural protection for the church
16–17	Gallio drives them from the tribunal; the crowd beats Sosthenes, the synagogue ruler; Gallio is indifferent	Sosthenes may be the same Sosthenes of 1 Cor 1:1 — later a believer; Gallio’s indifference is morally ambiguous but providentially useful
18	Paul remains many more days, then sails for Syria with Priscilla and Aquila; has taken a vow at Cenchreae	The vow (likely Nazirite) signals Paul’s continued Jewish identity and religious practice
19–21	Paul stops at Ephesus; leaves Priscilla and Aquila there; himself reasons in the synagogue briefly; declines extended invitation, promises to return if God wills	“If God wills” — theologically significant; Ephesus will become Paul’s longest and deepest field

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
22	Paul goes up to Jerusalem, greets the church, then returns to Antioch	Completion of second missionary journey; Antioch remains his sending base
23	Paul sets out on his third journey, strengthening disciples throughout Galatia and Phrygia	Brief transitional note; third journey begins without ceremony
24–25	Apollos arrives in Ephesus — a Jew from Alexandria, learned in the Scriptures, fervent in spirit, accurate about Jesus, but knowing only John’s baptism	A gifted, sincere, scripturally competent man with a catechetical gap — not a heretic
26	Priscilla and Aquila hear him, take him aside privately, and explain the way of God more accurately	Model of charitable, private, precise correction; no public shaming
27–28	Apollos crosses to Achaia with the church’s commendation; he powerfully refutes the Jews publicly, demonstrating from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ	Apollos now equipped; the mission continues through this unexpected instrument

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–8	Providence Prepares the Ground: Partners, Preaching, and the First Harvest
2	9–11	The Promise That Sustains: “I Have Many People in This City”
3	12–17	Providence Protects the Mission: Gallio and the Court That Couldn’t Stop the Gospel
4	18–23	Paul’s Departure and the

Division	Verses	Label
		Continuing Movement: Transition Without Interruption
5	24–28	Apollos: An Unexpected Instrument, Privately Equipped, Publicly Deployed

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: God’s sovereign promise undergirds and outlasts every obstacle to the gospel’s advance.

Primary Claim: God is assuring His servants that gospel ministry operates under sovereign divine promise — “I have many people in this city” — and calling them to remain, speak, and trust that promise rather than retreat in fear or calculate their own adequacy.

Applications (Five)

1. The promise “I have many people in this city” is not a comfort for the comfortable — it is a command for the afraid. Paul receives the night vision not when things are going smoothly but when opposition has forced him from the synagogue and the mission looks precarious. The Lord’s first word is “Do not be afraid” — which means Paul *was* afraid. The promise of sovereign election is not abstract theology for the seminar room; it is the specific fuel God provides for perseverance under pressure. Where you are tempted to pull back from gospel conversation, gospel proclamation, or gospel risk because the opposition seems decisive, this is precisely the moment the promise applies: God has already claimed people in that space, and your faithfulness is the appointed means by which they will be reached. (*Mind/belief*)

2. God assembles the team before you know you need them. Paul does not arrive in Corinth and strategically recruit Aquila and Priscilla as ministry partners. He arrives as a transient craftsman, and they are already there — expelled from Rome by a pagan emperor’s decree, positioned precisely where the mission requires them. The Gallio episode, the arrival of Silas and Timothy at the moment Paul needs full-time preaching freedom, the placement of Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus exactly when Apollos arrives — none of this is coincidence, and none of it is Paul’s planning. Train yourself to see the people God has placed around you not as accidental companions but as providential provision. The tentmaker next to you in the shop, the couple in your small group who know the Scriptures, the believer whose secular expertise opens a door — these are not incidental. God assembles the team. (*Mind/belief*)

3. Fear of opposition is a gospel problem before it is a courage problem — and it has a gospel solution. Paul's fear in Corinth is not a character defect to be overcome by sheer willpower. It is a failure of theological vision — he is seeing the opposition more clearly than the promise. The Lord's remedy is not a pep talk but a theological statement: *I am with you. No one will harm you. I have already claimed these people.* If your gospel witness has gone quiet — if you have stopped speaking at work, in your neighborhood, in your family — examine whether the silence is primarily a courage failure or a promise-amnesia failure. You do not manufacture courage. You rehearse the promise until the promise produces the courage. The antidote to fear in ministry is not greater willpower but a clearer view of who goes with you and who has already been claimed. (*Affections/worship*)

4. Faithful, private, unglamorous discipleship multiplies the mission beyond what any single public minister can accomplish. Priscilla and Aquila never preach in a synagogue in this chapter. They make tents. They host the church in their home. They take Apollos aside privately. And the result is that Apollos — one of the most gifted public expositors in the early church — is equipped and deployed across Achaia, demolishing Jewish arguments from the Scriptures. The multiplication of the Corinthian mission runs through a couple who were never the headline. Your private investment in one person's theological formation — a careful conversation, a book, a patient correction, a meal where Scripture is opened — may release a ministry larger than anything you will ever do publicly. Do not despise small, private, faithful acts of discipleship. God's math is not yours. (*Will/behavior*)

5. God governs the structures that could crush the mission — including the ones that don't know they are serving Him. Gallio does not believe in Jesus. He is not sympathetic to Paul. He dismisses the case because it bores him as a jurisdictional nuisance. And yet his ruling provides the structural legal protection that allows the Corinthian church to consolidate and the Pauline mission to continue. The Christian does not need to control the political or legal structures that surround the church's life. God governs kings and proconsuls, algorithms and institutions, corporate policies and cultural gatekeepers. The response this calls for is not naïve passivity — Paul uses his Roman citizenship when necessary, and wisdom about one's legal context is appropriate. But the response is also not anxious maneuvering, as if the mission's survival depends on getting the right people in the right offices. Pray for rulers. Work wisely in the structures you inhabit. And trust the One who turns the king's heart like a watercourse. (*Affections/worship*)

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Acts 18 teaches that God is the sovereign Lord of gospel advance — not merely its initial Author but its sustaining Governor through every stage of the mission. The night vision at the chapter's center reveals that divine sovereignty is not a background doctrine but a foreground promise: God speaks directly to name what His will is ("I have many people in this city") and what His servant must do in response (stay, speak, do not fear). The chapter also teaches that God's sovereignty operates through means —

providential partnership (Aquila and Priscilla), legal protection (Gallio), and unexpected instruments (Apollos) — without those means being anything other than ordinary human actors doing ordinary things. The theological claim is not that God bypasses human agency but that He governs it, orchestrates it, and superintends it toward His predetermined ends. This is the God who does not abandon the mission when opposition mounts, does not leave His servant without provision, and does not fail to gather the people He has already named as His own.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: The “I have many people in this city” promise is one of the most direct biblical expressions of what Reformed theology calls *particular redemption operating through ordinary means* — God’s sovereign election of specific persons, gathered through the preaching of the gospel by appointed messengers. This passage grounds Paul’s perseverance not in his resilience or giftedness but in the prior, sovereign claiming of people by God. This is the pastoral power of Reformed soteriology: the preacher does not need to generate his own motivation or fabricate confidence from human assessments of the audience’s receptivity. He preaches because God has already called these people His own, and preaching is the appointed instrument by which they are gathered. The chapter further displays the gospel working through the entire fabric of ordinary life — a trade, a marriage, a legal proceeding, a private conversation — demonstrating that God’s redemptive purpose is not confined to formal ecclesiastical structures but fills and governs all of creaturely existence. Apollos’s instruction by Priscilla and Aquila models the Reformed insistence that sound doctrine matters, that catechetical gaps have consequences, and that the church’s responsibility to one another includes charitable, precise correction toward full theological understanding.

Main Takeaway

God has already claimed people in every city, every workplace, every family, and every context you are tempted to give up on — and He is telling you what He told Paul: stop calculating the odds, stop measuring the opposition, and keep speaking. The mission does not depend on your adequacy. It depends on His promise. He has many people in this city, and He will get them. Stay.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Moralizing Paul’s courage as the sermon’s main point.** The most common misreading of Acts 18 is to treat Paul’s perseverance as the hero narrative — “Be brave like Paul; don’t quit when things get hard.” This inverts the chapter’s actual

logic. Paul does not persist because he is courageous; he persists because God commands him to persist and grounds the command in a sovereign promise. The sermon that ends with “be more like Paul” has substituted a human exemplar for a divine guarantee. The chapter is not primarily about Paul’s character — it is about God’s promise, and Paul’s perseverance is the *fruit* of hearing that promise, not the *model* for manufacturing it independently.

- **Spiritualizing away the historical specificity of the night vision.** Some expositors treat the vision as a general encouragement applicable to any Christian in any difficulty. While the principle of divine presence and promise extends beyond Paul, the chapter’s specificity matters: this was a word *to Paul, in Corinth, at a specific moment of threat*. The homiletical task is not to flatten the vision into a generic devotional comfort but to draw out the theological principle it embodies (sovereign election grounds faithful perseverance) and apply *that principle* to the congregation’s specific conditions. The vision’s historical particularity is evidence that God meets His servants in their actual circumstances — preach it that way.
- **Misreading Gallio’s role as merely illustrating Roman tolerance or church-state separation.** Gallio is not in this chapter to provide a lesson in civil liberties. He is a providential instrument. The chapter is not teaching Roman law; it is teaching that God governs magistrates. An exposition that lingers on Gallio’s legal reasoning as the point of the episode has missed the author’s intent. Luke includes this episode to show that the God who owns the mission also owns the legal structures that could threaten it.
- **Using Priscilla and Aquila primarily to advance a contemporary gender debate.** The Apollos episode is not primarily about who can teach whom. It is about the multiplication of the mission through faithful, private, doctrinally precise discipleship by ordinary believers who were never the public face of the Corinthian church. Subordinating the episode’s primary claim to either an egalitarian or complementarian proof text derails the exposition. Address the gender question with care and honesty where the text raises it — but do not allow it to become the controlling frame for a passage whose primary claim is about providential mission multiplication.
- **Treating “if God wills” in verse 21 as a throwaway expression of polite humility.** Paul’s departure from Ephesus with the words “I will come back if it is God’s will” is a theologically loaded phrase in the mouth of the man who has just received a sovereign promise about Corinth. It models what it looks like to plan, move, and commit within a framework of genuine submission to divine governance — not fatalism, not presumption, but active engagement held loosely in open hands before God. This is worth naming as a pattern of Christian decision-making rather than passing over as a conversational pleasantry.

- **Failing to preach the organic unity of the chapter across its five movements.**

The chapter contains so much material — arrival, vision, legal hearing, travel, and Apollos — that expositors are often tempted to preach only one episode (usually the night vision) or to treat the chapter as a loose anthology of unrelated missionary vignettes. But the chapter has a single spine: God’s sovereign governance of every element of the mission — partnership, courage, legal protection, transition, and instrument-preparation — all serving the advance of the word He has already promised will bear fruit. The Apollos section is not a separate story appended to Acts 18; it is the chapter’s final and most elegant illustration of the chapter’s governing claim: God provides for the mission through means you did not anticipate and instruments you did not train.