

Text: Ac 20.1-3

Proposition: Obscurity is no concern, serving God is our concern.

I am offering you a somewhat provocative title for our message today:

Preaching from (almost) Silence

What in the world does that mean?

Well, I am playing with words, mostly from the concept of an “argument from silence,” something often thought of as a fallacy. Here is Wikipedia:

To make an **argument from silence** (Latin: *argumentum ex silentio*) is to express a conclusion that is based on the absence of statements in historical documents, rather than their presence.¹

In other words, you make an argument because something is missing from a text, not because something is present in a text.

Another site offers this definition:

An **argument from silence** is an argument based on the absence of evidence. It is often listed as a fallacy. However, in many cases it is more of a weak argument that is somewhat strengthened when evidence would seem overwhelmingly likely.²

This site gives this example:

If advanced extraterrestrial life had visited earth, there would be ample evidence of it.³

We are in a section of Acts which contains another of Luke’s travelogues. It is an interesting feature of his writing, where Luke seems very interested in locating each place in Paul’s movements, but sometimes gives very little detail concerning what happened as he goes from place to place.

In this section commentators and preachers sometimes “fill in the blanks” with things Paul “must have done.” Their efforts aren’t entirely an “argument from silence,” as they appeal to clues found in Paul’s epistles. However, we must

¹ “Argument from Silence,” in *Wikipedia*, June 8, 2021,

https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Argument_from_silence&oldid=1027544535.

² “What Is an Argument From Silence?,” *Simplicable*, accessed July 17, 2021,

<https://simplicable.com/new/argument-from-silence>.

³ “What Is an Argument From Silence?”

admit there is very little to go on as we consider what Paul was doing during this time.

From this very little bit of material, then, I propose to make two sermons. One this week and one next week. This week we will talk about Paul's preaching in unknown parts during this time. I want this to be an encouragement to us to keep preaching the gospel though we are in a very obscure corner of the world in our service for God.

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Read Ac 20.1-6, text 1-3

Several weeks ago, I gave you a message talking about the problems in Corinth while Paul served in Ephesus. This bit of travelogue is part of the timeline for the resolution of that problem.

However, Paul wasn't idle during this time while he waited for resolution in Corinth before travelling to and from Corinth. We will try to piece together as much detail as we can from other passages and from that come to our conclusion and application.

I. The timing of Paul's travels

A. The outer markers of this travelogue

1. The Riot in Ephesus (Ac 19.23-40)

- a. Possibly occurred in connection with the Artemision (the festival of Artemis)
- b. This festival always occurred in the spring of the year

"According to 1 Cor. 16:8, written a few months before, he planned to leave Ephesus after Pentecost (probably in A.D. 55); it has been conjectured that the riot took place about the time of the Ephesian festival of the Artemisia, held annually in March/April. In the year 55 Pentecost fell on May 25. Paul may, of course, have had to change

his plans because of the riot and other troubles which he experienced in the province of Asia.”⁴

Note: the “conjecture” about the timing of the riot is an argument from silence!

2. The feast of Unleavened Bread (Ac 20.6)

- a. Jewish feast, Passover, also held in the spring of the year
- b. There is an obvious time lapse between the two events (see “three months in Greece” v. 3)
- c. Consequently, the time between Ac 19 and Ac 20.6 must be at least one year (one commentator⁵ suggests up to two years)

B. Some external evidence for the travelogue

1. The “letter of tears” (2 Cor 2.1-4) instead of a “visit of tears” led to the decision in Acts 20.1 (see 19.21 for the firm decision)
2. There was opportunity in Troas, but Paul pressed on to Macedonia in hopes of finding Titus (2 Cor 2.12-13)
3. Paul met Titus in Macedonia, with good news from Corinth (2 Cor 7.5-9)

“So rather than staying in Troas, Paul moved west into Macedonia where he met Titus who was returning from Corinth (2 Cor. 7:5–8). After receiving Titus’ favorable report of affairs in Corinth, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians from somewhere in Macedonia, probably in the fall of 56 A.D. (cf. 2 Cor. 12:14; 13:1–2).”⁶

4. Paul wrote 2 Corinthians as he anticipated his next move to Corinth (2 Cor 12.14)

⁴ F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 381.

⁵ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 618.

⁶ Constable, *Expository Notes*, Ac 20.1.

5. Our text says Paul spent “three months” in Greece (Corinth) just before returning to Macedonia for Passover (Ac 20.3, 6)
 - a. This is possibly the winter of 56/57
 - b. Several references in 1 Cor and Rom 16 indicate Paul wrote the letter to the Romans at this time

II. The activity of Paul’s travels

- A. The travels we have accounted for so far
 1. Beginning of the journey (1-2 months)
 - a. Ephesus to Troas
 - b. Troas to Macedonia
 2. End of the Journey (3-4 months)
 - a. Corinth to Macedonia (just before a Passover)
 - b. Macedonia to Troas (brings us to Acts 20.6ff.)
- B. The silent period: between Macedonia and Corinth – at least 9 months
 1. We know Paul was busy always preaching and starting churches
 2. He sensed opportunity in Troas as he passed through, for example

2 Cor 2.12-13 ¶ Now when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened for me in the Lord,¹³ I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I went on to Macedonia.

3. We know that Paul considered his ministry in the east completed (Rm 15.18-20)

Rm 15.18-20 For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed,¹⁹ in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit; so that from Jerusalem and round about as far as **Illyricum** I have fully preached the gospel of Christ.²⁰ And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was *already* named, so that I would not build on another man’s foundation;

C. Illyricum

1. Where is Illyricum?

“During this time Paul probably ministered as far as Illyricum, corresponding roughly to modern-day Yugoslavia (Rom. 15:19; cf. 2 Cor. 10:13).”⁷

a. Of course, Yugoslavia is outdated now: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia.

b. This region is essentially ancient “Illyricum,” a province in the Roman empire

2. When did Paul go to Illyricum?

a. The only real possibility is during this silent period in Acts 20

b. Romans written after the silent period, but before his next step from Corinth to Macedonia and then to Troas

3. What was Paul doing in Illyricum?

a. Preaching the gospel

b. Establishing churches

c. He would later send Titus to “Dalmatia” (a region of present Croatia, part of ancient Illyricum)

² Tim 4.10 for Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens *has gone* to Galatia, **Titus to Dalmatia**.

III. The silence of Paul’s travels (esp. in Acts)

A. Even the mission in Ephesus contains very little narrative

1. The event of the 12 disciples of John

2. The general statement of many miracles

3. The incident of the seven sons of Sceva

⁷ Stanley D. Toussaint, “Acts,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 412.

4. The burning of the magic books

5. The riot in Ephesus

Very little revelation concerning Paul's activities during a 2.5-3 yr ministry in Ephesus

B. Silence concerning the mission to Illyricum: at least 9 mos, maybe a year and a half

C. The meaning of silence

1. The ministry is about the gospel not the preacher

2. The thread of Acts is to take us through the major developments that took Christianity from Jerusalem to Rome

3. There are hundreds of events and much work done by the apostles where we have no record at all

a. Which apostles does Acts mention by name?

1) Each of the 11 in Ac 1.13, waiting in the Upper Room

2) Peter through to the Jerusalem conference in Ac 15

3) Matthias at his selection in Ac 1

4) John

a) with Peter, entering the temple when Peter heals the lame man in Ac 3

b) with Peter, confronting the Sanhedrin in Ac 4

c) with Peter, following up on the conversion of Samaritans in Ac 8

5) And Paul... from Ac 9 on to the end

4. Think of the ministry of these men, and then their disciples as they spread through the empire, teaching the gospel

a. Only a handful of those "second generation" preachers are known (Timothy, Silas, Titus, Erastus, others)

b. Very few of their works are known

What is the meaning of this silence?

The Christian church is the work of God, not men.

D. What is the meaning for us?

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Conclusion:

As you think about the moment in history which we occupy, our place in God's kingdom...

Our names aren't going to end up emblazoned in a prominent place in the history of our time, or even of the church of our time.

Yet we have the same mission the apostles and the "second generation" preachers had.

Proclaim the Lord Jesus Christ as the only hope of mankind, saving us from sin and for eternal life.

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