

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Gifts Are No Substitute for Doctrine...

PART 44

TEXT: ACTS 18:24-28 (ESV)



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RECEIVING LEADERS:

Today we do one of the most important things a church ever does, receive elders and deacons, charging them to guard the gospel and minister to the needs of the flock. We don't believe these roles are the ideas of men, but of God. Nor do we believe anything in a man ultimately qualifies him for such a role except the Lord's call on his life, as validated by the congregation that receives him. It's serious business... and a blessing from God.

In today's text we meet someone who will become a very influential leader in the early church—Apollos. He reminds me of another character we've studied before, Barnabas, in that he appears several times, but never really as the primary character in any of the passages. So if we don't try to pin him down a bit, we might never really see him. But if we do try and see him, and how he came to be a leader in the church, we remember the seriousness of such a call, and we also come across a few very practical lessons and pearls of wisdom along the way.

ACTS 18:24-28

²⁴Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. ²⁵He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. ²⁶He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him and explained to him the way of God more accurately.

²⁷And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, ²⁸for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.

INTRODUCING APOLLOS:

If someone were to introduce you, say, to people here today, what would they say about you? There are a variety of ways to go about this. Someone might call attention to your physical traits, "Remember, he's that tall, blond guy with glasses." Or they might focus on who you're with, "She's the mom of those adopted babies from Ethiopia." Or maybe they'd describe you according to your title, "He's the vice-president of that company." Or maybe where you're from, "They're that new family from Texas."

But there are also those who are known most easily for what they're good at; "He's that really gifted singer!" In our text today, Luke introduces us to an important figure in the early church, and though Luke certainly includes his North African roots, the thrust of his introduction of Apollos focuses on his talents.

Apollos was a Jew from Alexandria, the major port city in Egypt, connecting the Nile with the Mediterranean Sea. Beyond these details, Luke focuses on his abilities: **1) Apollos was an eloquent man.** Apollos was probably trained in Greek rhetorical skills, as Alexandria embraced a Greek philosophical culture. Apollos could take and hold an audience's attention, develop the points of his message and do so very persuasively.

2) He was competent in the Scriptures. This certainly refers to the Old Testament. Apollos was a Jew who had not only studied God's word, he understood what he studied. **3) He'd been instructed in the ways of the Lord.** While we can't be sure if this is a reference to Christ or to God the Father in the Old Testament (he knew of both) the emphasis here is that Apollos wasn't just a competent scholar. He **applied** what he learned to his life, he wanted to **walk** in the "way of the Lord."

4) He was fervent in Spirit, meaning he was passionate about the things of God, which bore itself out in the next detail Luke reveals; **5) he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he only knew the baptism of John.** This is an odd statement by any scholar's standards. It seems Luke is telling us when Apollos came to Ephesus, he taught accurately about Jesus, but apparently not sufficiently. What could this mean? James Boice gives this helpful explanation:

"It can mean one of two things. 1) He knew the baptism marking repentance, [John's baptism focused on repentance, preparing for Messiah's coming] not a baptism associated with the work of the Holy Spirit... drawing that person to Christ. This would mean Apollos knew nothing about the Holy Spirit..."
Or 2) "that Apollos knew 'only the baptism of John' could mean Apollos knew the unfolding of God's plan up to and including the ministry of John the Baptist but that he did not know that the Messiah, Whom John the Baptist announced, had now come... If this is the case, here was a man who knew the Old Testament, understood what the Messiah was to do, and then said, 'The time is here. The Messiah is about to come.'"

Either way, Apollos had embraced the teachings of John the Baptist concerning Jesus (either by traveling to Jerusalem to hear him, or by one of John's disciples, who dispersed after John was beheaded by Herod, ^(Mk. 6:25) coming to Alexandria). It's just he didn't have the full picture. What do you do with someone like this?

GIFTS DON'T SUBSTITUTE FOR DOCTRINE:

Well, Aquila and Priscilla heard Apollos teach, and they knew something needed to be done. But what? Should they warn his hearers that his teaching was deficient? Should they brand him a heretic? Should they try and steal away his students? It seems what they did was invite him over for dinner.

Apollos wasn't the enemy. He was, if anything, a gifted asset to the church—which he'd later prove to be in Corinth, where he'd serve in a long, fruitful ministry. Aquila and Priscilla took Apollos in and filled out the picture for him. They told him the rest of the story. What all that was, we can't know for sure. But what we do know is this: 1) Apollos was humble enough to be corrected. 2) He embraced what Aquila and Priscilla taught him, and 3) his effectiveness as a preacher only grew. He was an asset to the church. But here we're reminded of something so crucial to the health of any church: doctrine matters.

Apollos seems like a man people would follow on his polish and pedigree alone, regardless of what he taught. We like being around gifted people. But you can have all the gifts in the world, all appearances of a “successful looking” church, use all the right trendy words by which to introduce yourself, but when you’ve finished listing all your appealing qualities, if your doctrine is weak, incomplete (intentionally or not) or false, may God, in his mercy, attach a severe “although” to the end, revealing the essential truths you lack—as Luke does with Apollos. And may such churches (and those who make them up) respond humbly as Apollos does with Aquila and Priscilla, by embracing truth.

LEAVING EPHESUS WITH REFERENCES:

Apollos stayed and ministered in Ephesus for a while, but then wanted to travel as a minister to the Roman province of Achaia. We learn later that he ended up working in Corinth, Achaia’s capital city. If there was any question about Apollos’ orthodoxy, Luke settles this by telling us he arrived in Corinth with a glowing letter of recommendation from the church in Ephesus.

This brings us to one last detail about Apollos we should look at. When you go on to read Paul’s letters to the Corinthians, you get the sense there was a rivalry between he and Apollos—not one they chose, but one imposed on them by the believers in Corinth. Some said, “I follow Paul,” others, “I follow Apollos.” (1 Cor 3:4-6) to which Paul replied, “What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.”

They were different from each other. And people apparently had favorites. So Paul objected, not to Apollos’ teaching, but to people’s favoritism. We get a clue that the Corinthian believers could be particular about their preferences in the church. Paul notes he’s been criticized in Corinth for lacking eloquence in 2 Cor 10:10. They liked his writing, but found him hard to listen to. Maybe this is because Paul refused to engage in the stylistic methods that were popular in his day (like some might refuse, for example, to use video in their sermons today), or maybe he was just harder to hear than to read. That’s pretty common.

Regardless, Paul never pitted himself against Apollos. In fact every time Paul mentions Apollos, he regards him as an able, faithful Christian teacher, valuable to the church. There is also no hint in Paul’s tone that Apollos let his popularity go to his head. It is a curious yet common thing. Apollos and Paul both faced challenges in their ministry in Corinth, not because of their deficiencies, but because of their effectiveness. Apollos, who mostly resides in the background of Scripture, was a faithful, gifted leader in the church, whom God called and used—and here Luke introduces us to him.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS FOR US:

Here on a day when we receive and recognize leaders in this church, we do so with a text before us which is rich in practical points of application for us. I’ll highlight four in closing.

1. You can ride the crest of talent for a while, but to stand, you must stand on truth. Raw talent is not enough. Apollos would’ve done a lot of things right whether he had his doctrine straight or not. People are hired for jobs because they’re gifted all the time. But when it comes to the church of Jesus Christ, our objective is not to run smoothly or impress or even to be liked. Our mission is to know and make known the astonishing grace of God. This is a specific, often unpopular message which often plays to our weaknesses far more than strengths. If we stand at all, it will have to be on the truth of the Gospel.

2. The Church takes and needs all kinds. If you were to get to know all the leaders of this church, you’d find a wide range of interests, experiences and convictions. And the same would be true if you got to know the people in the rows in front or back of you. Apollos, Paul, Aquila and Priscilla were different people with different backgrounds and different gifts. Yet they were all important to the church. How do we know? Because God called each one of them and used them. If you’re a follower of Christ, you are **needed**. Yet conversely, you’ll never be **all** that’s needed. No elder can have every insight, no deacon can anticipate every need, no one member of the body can be close with all the others. By God’s design, the Body needs each part.

3. If the church needs workers, we should ask God for them, and receive what He gives us. As Aquila and Priscilla worked with the church in Ephesus, no doubt they prayed for support. God gave them Apollos. God delights to raise up people to serve His church so His church might carry out her mission to bear witness to Christ with vigor. However, our particular preferences can’t trump God’s provision. He may answer our prayer from time to time by giving us someone quite unlike us. Imagine blue collar, tent-making Aquila and Priscilla sizing up their philosophical, rhetorically trained, North African partner, Apollos. Ask God for workers, but you must then receive what He brings along—even if it means you need to make some adjustments to what you regard as a good fit.

4. Finally, ask, ‘Am I more like Apollos before Aquila and Priscilla or after?’ Don’t let this important opportunity to examine the authenticity of your own faith pass you by. Like Apollos, you can be passionate about what you know, and know quite a lot, even teach it to others... but still not know Christ personally. You can know Him in name only, but not as your Lord and Savior. If this is you, you are not a Christian yet. You **must** come to know Him and His saving work on the cross for sinful people—counting yourself among them, by faith. Perhaps there’s an Aquila in your life right now, seeking to deepen your understanding of Who Christ really is. Pray for ears to hear.

But you don’t have to wait for someone to come to you. If you know you need to know more, seek someone out who can teach you about Christ and Him crucified—and what that means for your soul. The beauty of a text like this is we see a picture of the reality that our God is engaged in the intricacies of our lives, using His people for His purposes. May He lead us well, making leaders of us all so we might lead others well in knowing and making known the astonishing grace of God. And may He continue to bless the leadership of this church.

Notes: