

K. Paul's Third Missionary Journey (18:23-21:16)

After a season in Antioch, Paul departed once again, heading northwest by land into Asia Minor. Treating only in passing the transitional period between the second and third missionary journeys, Luke recounted nothing of Paul's ministry in Antioch, the duration of his stay there or the reason for his departure. He noted only that, when he did leave, Paul made his way in successive fashion through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, visiting the congregations that were the Spirit's fruit of his first missionary journey. As always, Paul's time among the saints was purposeful and productive. His intent wasn't simply visitation and the pleasure of getting reacquainted, but the saints' establishment, edification and encouragement (18:23, cf. 14:21-23, 15:41). Paul understood and took seriously his calling and mandate; at all times and in all circumstances, he was resolute in his commitment to "redeem the time" – to proclaim, admonish and teach in accordance with Christ's power in order to present every man complete in Him (ref. Colossians 1:28-29; cf. Ephesians 5:15ff).

1. Luke recorded that, sometime after Paul had departed Ephesus for Antioch, a Jew named Apollos arrived in Ephesus. Luke gives no indication of the timing; Apollos' arrival may have followed shortly after Paul's departure, or it may have been while Paul was traveling through Galatia and Phrygia. Neither does Luke explain why this man had come to Ephesus; his concern clearly wasn't the circumstances that brought Apollos to that city, but the providential and important fruit of his presence there.
 - a. Apollos was a native of Alexandria in Egypt. Founded by Alexander the Great around 330 B.C., this namesake city became an important Greek social and cultural center and only grew in significance under later Roman rule. It was renowned for its schools and scholarship and boasted one of the largest libraries in the civilized world. Alexandria was a diverse and cosmopolitan city, but it also had a large Jewish population; two of its five districts were populated with Jews. The Jewish presence in Alexandria was so significant that its Ptolemaic rulers (who succeeded Alexander) maintained a formal, legal distinction between the city's Greek, Egyptian and Jewish groups.

Alexandria's cultural and academic offerings were well suited to the Hellenized Jews of the Mediterranean world and the city eventually became the hub of Hellenistic Judaism, even producing the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, in the third and second centuries preceding the birth of Christ. Later, during the Christian era, Alexandria would produce the Alexandrian catechetical school and its leading disciples and proponents, Clement and Origen.

"Alexandria was the main seat of Jewish-Hellenistic learning. The Jewish-Alexandrine philosophy was developed here; its chief exponent, Philo, was still living. Here the LXX [Septuagint] had been translated, a work that was of more influence than any other translation of the Old Testament. The inspired New Testament writers quoted from it. Although they regarded Jerusalem as the great center of their religion, the Alexandrine Jews had their own temple at Leontopolis." (R. C. H. Lenski)

Apollos was evidently a product of Alexandria's intellectual, academic and biblical culture; Luke described him as an *eloquent* man (18:24a), and this term (*logios*) in classical Greek denoted a person who is learned and cultured. During the later Koine (New Testament) period its meaning shifted toward the notion of eloquence, which embraces the classical sense but places the emphasis on the way scholarship and cultural sophistication express themselves.

Apollos was learned Jew, but specifically in regard to the Hebrew text; according to Luke, he was "*mighty in the Scriptures*" (18:24b). In context, this adjective speaks of the authoritative nature and unassailable competence of his scriptural scholarship. Apollos was a man of immense gifting and accomplishment: He possessed the knowledge and authoritative competence of a rabbi, but also the powerful and persuasive communication capabilities that result from learned rhetorical skill and a natural speaking gift.

- b. Being a Jew, Apollos would have been steeped in the Scriptures from his childhood, but it's also possible that he later was afforded some formal rabbinical training. Apollos was a competent Jewish scholar, but, more importantly, one who at some point was exposed to the person and doctrine of Jesus of Nazareth – what Luke described as the "*way of the Lord*" (18:25a). His knowledge of Jesus transcended mere familiarity; Apollos had been formally instructed ("catechized") in Christian doctrine, and that instruction had evidently convinced him that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah promised in the Scriptures.

Apollos' instruction had informed his biblical perspective and understanding, but more importantly it had inflamed his heart (18:25b). The truths he'd come to believe had had a profound impact upon him and he found himself compelled to proclaim and teach those truths to other men.

- c. Luke described Apollos as a man soundly instructed in biblical truth, even to the point that he recognized and embraced Jesus as the Messiah revealed and predicted in the Hebrew Scriptures. He "*taught accurately the things concerning Jesus*"; nevertheless, Luke qualified Apollos' understanding and instruction in a crucial way: He was "*acquainted only with the baptism of John*" (18:25c).

Ironically, it's very easy and common for readers of Acts to pass by this remark, and yet it is the focal point of the context. It is critical to Luke's account, and not because it explains the nature of Aquila and Priscilla's ministry to Apollos (though it does). This statement is the key to understanding the passage and, more importantly, to discerning the passage's contribution to Luke's overall account.

This being the case, it is absolutely essential to determine what Luke meant by it. What does it mean that Apollos was only acquainted with John's baptism? Some have focused on the issue of baptism and concluded that Apollos' deficiency was that he hadn't undergone baptism as a believer. The obvious problem with this view is that the remedy was *instruction*, not the waters of Christian baptism.

The following observations help to illumine Luke's statement:

- 1) First of all, it indicates that Apollos was familiar with the person and work of John the Baptizer. He knew of John's ministry at the Jordan River, and the implication is that he also was familiar with John's message and the purpose of his baptizing work. Apollos knew that John had proclaimed to Israel the advent of the Messiah in Jesus of Nazareth (John 1:19-30) and thereby the in-breaking of the kingdom of God and the people's need to repent lest they miss His coming (cf. Matthew 3:1-12; Luke 3:1-18).
- 2) But Luke's emphasis on Apollos' scriptural scholarship also implies that he recognized John as the fulfillment of Isaiah's promise of a forerunner (Isaiah 40:1-3). Apollos knew him to be the prophet God promised to send to announce and prepare Israel for the day of His visitation – the day of everlasting deliverance and comfort for Zion and her children (40:4-11). And perceiving John in this way, Apollos would have recognized Jesus as the messianic Servant appointed by Yahweh to come in His name and authority to offer Himself as a vicarious offering for the sins of the people (cf. Luke 3:3-6; John 1:19-30, 3:23-36 with Isaiah 40:1-11, 53:1-12).
- 3) Thus Apollos' recognition of Jesus as the Isaianic Servant implies that he discerned the significance of the crucifixion. And, being "instructed in the way of the Lord," he doubtless also knew of and proclaimed Jesus' resurrection. This truth is at the very heart of Christian doctrine; Luke could hardly speak of Apollos as a man who "taught accurately the things concerning Jesus" if he had no knowledge of His resurrection.
- 4) Apollos knew much about Jesus and what he knew he taught with precision and passion. Nevertheless, his "gospel" fell short: Apollos was effectively a disciple of John and his perception and understanding of the "Christ event" didn't go beyond that of his master. John was the greatest of Israel's prophets, but yet a man who stood outside the kingdom of God; he saw it and announced it, but didn't live to enter it (Matthew 11:1-15).

Luke's statement highlights John and his ministration as the ordained hinge between the "age that was" and the "age that has come." Israel's life and history had portrayed and prepared for Christ and His work, and John emerged from within Israel as the last and greatest of her prophets. He stood on the threshold of salvation-historical fulfillment as the last prophet of the old order and the herald of the new order and its preeminent Prophet Jesus of Nazareth (Hebrews 1:1-3; cf. again Isaiah 40:1-11). And so, while John recognized Jesus as the promised Messiah and announced Him to Israel, he perceived Him through the Old Testament revelation. John's vision was set entirely within the forms, features, and history of the Israelite theocracy as it revealed and prepared for the coming kingdom and its messianic King; he detected the kingdom, but as one outside it.

Thus Luke's description of Apollos emphasizes that, while what he knew of Jesus was correct and scripturally accurate, it was incomplete and therefore insufficient (cf. 18:25b, 26b). Apollos, like John, was yet on the outside looking in: He, too, perceived Jesus through the eyes of an Old Testament prophet, interpreting Him through the lens of the preparatory Israelite revelation.

Apollos recognized Jesus of Nazareth as the Savior-deliverer predicted by the Hebrew Scriptures and so was right to proclaim and explain Him in the light of those Scriptures. But before he could be a vessel fully equipped to carry the Lord's gospel, he needed to discern how Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures, not simply the fact that He is the Messiah promised by them. *Apollos needed to learn how to read the Scriptures through Jesus, not merely Jesus through the Scriptures.*

Finally, Luke's juxtaposing of the parallel account in 19:1-7 suggests that Apollos did indeed have a *baptismal* as well as doctrinal deficit. He had been baptized with John's baptism, but apparently hadn't been baptized into Jesus by the Holy Spirit. He needed to become a true son of the kingdom, entering by the Spirit into the fullness of the One who is Himself the truth. Thus the privilege and glory of the saints of the new creation: They, even the least among them, are greater than John, though he was the greatest man in the age of preparation (Matthew 11:11).

- d. These observations clarify the work which Aquila and Priscilla undertook. The Lord had appointed and gifted Apollos for the ministration of His gospel and He ordained that this couple would complete his preparation. (Though neither they nor Paul could have known it at the time, the Spirit had this work in mind when He brought Paul to them. In God's wise and boundless provision, Paul would disciple Apollos long before he met him.) Apollos' knowledge was accurate, but it needed to be "Christified": It needed to be "Spirit and life." Fitness to proclaim Jesus' gospel means knowing Him in the Spirit who reveals and imparts Him.

Aquila and Priscilla were faithful in their labors and Apollos was doubtless an eager and devoted disciple. His heart had been inflamed by only a rudimentary understanding of Jesus; how much, then, would each new insight stoke that fire. And if his previous knowledge had compelled him to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah, the Spirit's enlivening and enlargement of his understanding must have made him feel like he would explode if he were not able to proclaim his Lord.

- e. Once again Luke gave no indication of how long this season of discipleship continued. But continue it did, until, in the Lord's perfect timing, Apollos was prepared for the work to which he was being called. Perhaps through many discussions with his mentors, Apollos found his heart captivated by Christ's work in Corinth and he became increasingly burdened to travel there, meet the saints and minister to them. Eventually the day came that Aquila and Priscilla and the brethren sensed that this man of God was ready and they sent him across the sea with a letter of commendation and their hearty blessing. Paul had laid a foundation in Corinth; now his unknown disciple was about to build upon it.