

A Great Leader

Acts 18:24-28

By Phillip G. Kayser on 7-27-2008

Several years ago, Bill Moyers was giving a commencement speech at a University. Afterwards, a lady greeted him and said, “Mr. Moyers, you have been in both journalism and government. That makes everything you say twice as hard to believe.” With growing cynicism like that, why do people still eagerly follow leaders in journalism and in government? And what makes for a good leader? Hitler was a powerful leader, but he was hardly a good leader. Is a leader just a person who is specially gifted, or is leadership learned? There are some who say that anyone can be made into a great leader. I think most of us would recognize that simply isn’t true. At the same time, all of us can grow in our ability to lead, and all of us are called from time to time to be leaders rather than simply followers.

There are debates about whether leadership is learned or whether it is a gifting. I believe it is a bit of both. I make the distinction between God’s call to lead and a position of leadership. In fact, you could make that distinction in many areas of life. All of us are called to teach, but not all of us are teachers. All of us are called to hospitality, but not all of us have the gift of hospitality. All of us are called to give, but not all of us have the gift of giving. And I would say the same of leadership. There is much we can learn from this passage, even if we aren’t officially recognized as leaders.

Let me first of all define leadership. There are many complex definitions. I like Arthur Battiste’s simple one. He says that “Leadership is the art of balancing the following of a vision and persuading others to follow you, in the act of following that vision.” Some people are much more effective in doing that than others. From all that we know of Apollos, he appears to have been a great leader. And I want to look at some of the characteristics that made him great. Some we will be able to imitate; others we won’t.

I. **A great leader already has great qualities. Apollos had:**

A. ***Three sovereign foundations (v. 24a – “a Jew...Apollos...Alexandria”)***

Verse 24 begins with something that Apollos could do nothing about – the family he was born into and the circumstances of his early life. Verse 24 says, **Now a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria...** Just that statement shows how God sovereignly ruled out leadership in certain communities and paved the way to leadership in others. There are three facts here: 1) He was a Jew, 2) he was given a Hellenistic name of a pagan god, 3) He was born in the famous community of Alexandria, Egypt. The Alexandrian Jews were considered compromised by Jerusalem. But even Jews who sought to maintain close ties with Israel were so thoroughly trained in Greek thought and culture that it would have been hard for Apollos to lead anyone in Jerusalem. He would certainly have had to change his name. But he felt quite comfortable with his name, and he felt quite comfortable with His Jewishness. Like most Alexandrian Jews, he was able to hold together the Jewish and the Greek cultures. His upbringing and training enabled Him to be able to bridge the gap in both communities. His Jewishness would have made him somewhat sensitive to the Jewish way of thinking, but as an Alexandrian Jew, he would have fit right into Greek culture. He had sensitivities to the Greeks that Peter, James and John totally lacked. The next word “eloquent” is a Greek word that also implies “learned,” and Alexandria was the research capital of the world. It boasted many scholars, Jewish and non-Jewish, had the largest library in the world (containing 700,000 volumes), and was the place where the Bible was translated into Greek. So the sovereign foundations of his early life prepared him for leadership entirely without his choice.

And I think we need to learn to trust God with the circumstances that we were born into. We can't change those things, yet they were orchestrated by a sovereign God to make us what we need to be. I am convinced by Romans 8:28 that this is true. From the time of your birth God has sovereignly been working all things together for your good. Some of you have had rather difficult childhoods. Rather than being bitter over the sovereign foundations of your first eighteen years, you need to learn to trust God for them and see how they fit into the overall painting that God is making of your life. How you were born, your genetic makeup, your personality, your parents, your upbringing, when you came to faith, are all part of God's perfect preparation of your life, even if some of those things

seem strange, evil and bizarre. I think one of the most exciting exercises that I have ever done was to make a personal timeline of my life from birth to the present to see what God was doing by way of preparation. For the first time I began to see how meaningless and painful events were indeed God's sovereign hand of preparation. For the first time, I saw God's purpose in those things. God made Apollos incredibly effective in Corinth (in part) because of his upbringing. Of course, that same upbringing would make Apollos very ineffective in working in Palestine. But that's not where God wanted him to be.

B. Eloquence in speech (v. 24)

Verse 24 goes on to describe Apollos as “**an eloquent man.**” Not all of us can be eloquent. Of course, eloquence alone is not enough. Leaders must be able to persuade others to follow their goals. Otherwise eloquence can end up as entertainment. But eloquence can be a powerful tool in leadership if it is harnessed to God's will.

C. Powerful handling of Scripture (v. 24)

Verse 24 goes on to fine-tune what kind of leader God had made Apollos to be when it says, “**and mighty in the Scriptures...**” Not everyone can marshal the arguments of Scripture in a powerful, pointed and persuasive way. But God had made Apollos to be so powerful in his handling of the Scriptures that when he went to Corinth, some people began to become followers of Apollos. They loved his preaching more than Paul's and Peter's. And Paul had to caution about the idolatry of worshipping man's gifts rather than being thankful to God for all the gifts that God has given. But this was an ability that gave Apollos powerful leadership persuasion.

D. Providential connections (v. 24)

The fourth thing that we see in verse 24 is the simple phrase “**came to Ephesus.**” Apollos “happened” to come to Ephesus just after Paul left (which was such a blessing for Ephesus), and he “happened” to leave for Corinth just before Paul gets to Ephesus in chapter 19, verse 1. Of course, nothing just happens in life. God was orchestrating his meeting with Aquila and Priscilla to further strengthen his leadership. And God was going to move Apollos on to Corinth so as not to be overshadowed by Paul. Corinth needed Apollos, and these chance happenings were not chance after all. And we can say the same things about the experiences God continues to bring into our lives. Learn to see God's hand in everything. He is a loving Father

who is preparing you through life's circumstances to be more effective and to cause you to depend ever more upon Him. Many Christian leaders have learned to see God's hand in providence.

E. Religious instruction (v. 25)

Verse 25 speaks of some religious instruction that Apollos received – “**This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord.**” We learn from the next chapter that he must have been led to the Lord by disciples of John who traveled to Alexandria. But they had done some thorough instruction of this young convert. And this previous instruction pays off as he begins to teach in this needy mission field that Paul had neglected.

I think of Thomas Jefferson's preparations of Lewis and Clark and how some of those preparations came in so handy during the course of their explorations of this continent. Jefferson sent Meriwether Lewis off to Philadelphia to study under the top scientists of the day. He spent months soaking up everything he could about botany, mineralogy, medicine and celestial navigation. And it paid off big time. Leaders are constantly learning. They are trying to stay ahead of the curve. That's why many people use the expression, “You can't lead if you don't read.”

F. Grippled by a vision of something greater than himself (v. 25)

But perhaps the biggest aspect of his leadership abilities was not that he was instructed, but that he was captured by God's grace. He was instructed in the “**way of the Lord.**” He had become gripped by a vision of something that was greater than him. This is true of all leadership – even in sports. Phil Jackson says, “The most effective way to forge a winning team is to call on the players' need to connect with something larger than themselves.” John McDonnell of the Boeing Company's board of directors, said, “... if you have a vision, you will see opportunities where others see only problems.” This was certainly true of William Carey. Some people wanted him to mind his own business and just continue to be a shoe repairman. But he could not. He was seized by a vision of India becoming a Christian nation. And though he did not see India converted completely, the things that he was able to lead that nation to do are nothing short of astounding. You fathers can be gripped by a vision of something that is greater than you if you will have a multi-generational vision of what God can do through your family. Get the Vision Forum CD's of the 200-year plan.

G. Enthusiastic spirit (v. 25)

Of course, he had an enthusiastic spirit to go along with that vision. Verse 25 describes him as “**fervent in spirit.**” This deals in part with his emotional quotient. Leadership books point out that purpose and passion go hand in hand. To be effective we have to care; we have to have a fire that sustains us through thick and through thin. And Apollos was passionate about what he believed. It wasn’t just theory. God made him fervent in spirit.

H. Accuracy in handling the Word - competence (v. 25)

The eighth quality that he already had was accuracy in handling the Word. This doesn’t mean that leaders can’t make mistakes. They can. But incompetence will never lead to leadership. If we men want to lead our families, we must read and develop a knowledge base of the things that will be important for our families. 1 Corinthians 14 says that our wives are supposed to ask us for theological advice. That means that you need to read a systematic theology – one like Robert Reymond’s *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*. We can’t be incompetent in our leadership. We need to read books that show how to apply Scripture to all areas of life – books like Rushdoony’s *Institutes of Biblical Law*, or the Puritan “how-to” manual called, *The Christian Directory*, by Richard Baxter.

I. Boldness (v. 26)

And finally, he had boldness. Verse 26 says, “**So he began to speak boldly in the synagogue.**” If leaders are afraid of risks, they won’t take definitive action. If they are timid, people will not follow. If they are pessimistic, they will be blinded to what God can do. Thomas Edison is credited with saying “Every significant accomplishment in the history of civilization was once considered impossible by all but the few, and it is those few who become leaders.” Apollos had a remarkable mix of talents, vision, character issues and faith.

II. A great leader always has room for growth

A. Apollos lacked a theology of fulfillment (v. 25)

1. He had truth from John about the coming Messiah

But what I want to point out under Roman numeral II is that great leaders (no matter how great they presently are) are always seeking to grow. And certainly Apollos had room for growth. First of all, he lacked a theology

of fulfillment. Verse 25 says, he “**taught accurately the things of the Lord, though he knew only the baptism of John.**” In other words, he was teaching about the kingdom from an Old Testament perspective. Somehow he had heard the message that John had given about the coming Messiah, but did not know that the Messiah had come yet.

2. But he knew nothing of Christ’s death and resurrection

Apparently he knew nothing about Christ’s death and resurrection.

3. He knew nothing of the baptism of Pentecost

He knew nothing of the baptism of Pentecost. I think that is clear when we come to chapter 19. And this is significant. Matthew 11:11 says, “Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” If people who are living on this side of the cross and resurrection are greater than John the Baptist, what does that say about Apollos. He was a very gifted preacher, but he lacked a theology of fulfillment. He had room for growth.

B. Apollos lacked fullness of experience (v. 26)

1. An OT experience of the power of Christ’s atonement

Second, he lacked the fullness of experience. Verse 26 says, **When Aquila and Priscilla heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.** He had an Old Testament experience of the power of Christ’s atonement. He is clearly a believer. But there is a vast difference between looking forward to something that is not yet accomplished, and the steadfast confidence that we have that Christ’s death has accomplished everything that we need for life and godliness. Christ blood has such power that Revelation 12 says that the saints overcame Satan by the word of their testimony and by the blood of the Lamb. It has a power in spiritual warfare that Old Testament saints lacked. How important is Christ’s blood to your experience?

2. An OT experience of the victory of the resurrection

He only had an Old Testament experience of the victory of the resurrection. You cannot read the book of Ephesians without realizing that the resurrection of Jesus ushered both Jesus and His saints into victory. Paul speaks of “**the exceeding greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right**

hand in the heavenly places... and He put all things under His feet (Eph. 1:19-22). This is speaking of a powerful reality that is transferred to us in a way that very few saints in the Old Testament experienced. He said that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in us who believe. But you can't believe or have faith in that resurrection power if you don't know that it has been fulfilled.

Do you know that resurrection power, or do you live like saints in the Old Testament did? Ephesians 2:6 says, “**and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.**” Do you pray as those who have authority as kings and priests, seated with Christ right now in the heavenlies? Do you enter the Holy of Holies with boldness? Too many Christians live Old Testament lives and do not experience the victory and power that we have because of Christ's resurrection. 2 Corinthians 2:14 says, “**Now thanks *be* to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place.**” If we have that supernatural power, it will profoundly affect our leadership.

3. An OT experience of the power of the Holy Spirit (implication of the second half of this section – 19:1-7)

He also lacked the New Testament baptism of the Holy Spirit. I will address that issue in chapter 19:1-7. Ordinarily believers are ushered into the baptism of the Spirit at the moment of conversion, but these two passages indicate that we can live as believers and not have the power of God's Spirit anointing us for our labors. It's not enough to simply be baptized. We need to be filled with the Spirit over and over again. So we see that there was room for growth in Apollos. And there will always be room for growth in us. The greatest leaders are those who are growing.

III. A great leader is always willing to learn from those he teaches (v. 26)

But I think that Roman numeral III is also critically important: It is that Apollos had the humility to learn from those that he was teaching. Look at verse 26 again: “**So he began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Aquila and Priscilla heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.** Many leaders are not willing to hear the suggestions of their people. Too many leaders shut down productive discussion by “pulling rank” on the members. This is true in families, business and in the church. But listen to what the old Presbyterian theologian, James Bannerman had to say,

[M]embers and office-bearers of the Church are mutually entitled to give as well as to receive advice and counsel; and that those in office are bound to give all due weight to the opinions of the membership, so as, if possible, to bring about a mutual understanding and agreement.¹

Leaders need to be willing to learn from those that they lead. That is not a sign of weakness – it is a sign of greatness. But it is not just church leaders who can be tyrannical. So can fathers and husbands. A willingness to learn from those that we lead is a sign of a great leader. But let's look at how Priscilla and Aquila instructed him. When you appeal to a leader who is over you, it is wise to use tact and gentleness. They certainly did.

A. They gained the right - Aquila and Priscilla heard him

First of all, they gained the right to speak to him by listening. Verse 26 goes on to say, “**When Aquila and Priscilla heard him....**” From the next phrase we know that they politely heard him all the way through. They didn't walk out on him. James 1:19-20 says, **So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.** Aquila and Priscilla were quick to hear. When leaders know that the followers want to follow and want to bring joy to the leader, listening to correction can be much more joyful.

B. They used tact

1. Aquila took the lead (contrast v. 18 and 26)

The second thing that they did is to use tact. That is hinted at in the contrast we see in verses 18 and 26. In verse 18 Priscilla's name is mentioned first. And her name is mentioned first in Romans 16:3 and 2 Timothy 4:19. That is so unusual for that culture that some commentaries believe this was done because she was head and shoulders above her husband in terms of knowledge and giftings. Any time the two of them were together it became clear that she had the answers, knowledge, abilities and insights. That could have given her a leadership role in the family if she was not careful. The only time that Aquila's name comes first is when he is taking leadership. In the vast majority of Greek manuscripts (only four exceptions), Aquila's name comes first in verse 26. Luke is making a point. When they are explaining the way of God more accurately in verse 26, she makes sure that Aquila takes the lead. They are both talking, but he takes the

¹ James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (1869; Banner of Truth, 1960,1974), volume I, page 242.

lead. I think that is so tactful. It kept Aquila from feeling threatened by her giftings and it kept Apollos from thinking her to be out of place.

2. They corrected privately

The second evidence of tact is that they pulled him aside and talked to him privately. Even though he had taught something wrong publicly, they didn't challenge him publicly. They did so privately. Some of these gossip blogs that are dedicated to smearing leaders justify their public campaigns by saying that public figures need to get used to being disagreed with publicly. But I think this couple had a much better plan.

C. They gave helpful information

And then finally, they “**explained to him the way of God more accurately.**” This is not discipleship or teaching. It's a weaker Greek word that refers to sharing of information. But even though there was tact that was used, Apollos shows himself to be teachable. We as elders want to model that. Fathers need to be teachable. Husbands need to be teachable. Businessmen need to be teachable. It's not a sign of weakness – it's a sign of greatness. A great leader is always willing to learn from those that he teaches.

IV. A great leader finds power through dependence (vv. 27-28)

A. Dependent on God's providence (v. 27)

There is one more point I want to develop and that is that a great leader finds power through dependence. First, Apollos was dependent upon God's providence. Verse 27 says, “**And when he desired to cross to Achaia...** Apollos would prove to be a tremendous help in the church of Corinth. But God's providence in meeting Priscilla and Aquila *first* was something that hugely helped his later labors.

I mentioned the story of Lewis and Clarke earlier. President Thomas Jefferson thought that Lewis needed to study under the top scientists of that day, including physicians. He studied under Dr. Benjamin Rush, the most celebrated physician of that day. His knowledge of medicine not only helped his men, but also probably saved their lives. Let me tell you one story. In North Dakota, he used his learning to deliver the baby of a young Indian woman by the name of Sacagawea. He saved her life, and she joined the expedition the following spring. She was a Shoshone Indian by birth who

had been captured by another tribe, had been freed, and then had married a French-speaking Canadian.

When the Corps of Discovery was in desperate need of horses to cross the Bitterroot Range of the Rocky Mountains, they came across a band of Shoshone Indians. The Indians debated whether to kill the team right then and there or whether to wait. All of them would have died if it hadn't been for the fact that Sacagawea was a Shoshone Indian, and that she recognized the chief of the tribe as being her much-loved and long-lost brother. What are the odds of that happening? It was God's providence. And many leaders down through history have learned to depend upon God's providence to take them to their next levels. They are trusting that God is for us and not against us. Pessimism about God's providence kills faith. In contrast, Apollos was excited about what God's providence held for him in Achaia – "...he desired to cross to Achaia."

B. Dependent on God's people (v. 27)

Second, he was dependent on God's people. Verse 27 says, "**And when he desired to cross to Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him...**" Being an unknown teacher, he needed their recommendation. Leaders and followers learn to depend upon each other, covering for each other's strengths and weaknesses. There is a mutual dependence of leaders and followers. In fact, you don't really have leadership without it.

C. Dependent on God's grace (v. 27)

The third area of dependence was upon God's grace. Verse 27 continues, "**...and when he arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace.** He helped them, but the only reason he was able to help them was because those followers had God's grace within them. Leaders cannot produce changed hearts. They are men of prayer because they are totally dependent upon God's grace to transform people. And when God's grace is at work, then leaders can help them much. But we must never think that we can do it in our own strength.

By the way, this is one of many Scriptures that speak of God's sovereign grace. Notice that these people didn't get grace because they believed. Instead, they believed because of God's grace. Faith is a gift of God. No one can have saving faith apart from God's grace. And all to whom God gives His grace will believe.

D. Dependent on God's Scriptures (v. 28)

Finally, he was dependent upon God's Scriptures. Verse 28 says, **"...for he vigorously refuted the Jews publicly, showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ."** He didn't simply depend upon his eloquence. He depended upon the Scriptures to stop the mouths of adversaries and to stir up faith in His elect. And whether we are followers or leaders, God's Word must be the foundation of all that we do. The authority of leaders is a delegated authority, and it is subject to the Word of God. We lose our authority when we lose the Word.

Martin Luther said, "The only mark of the Christian Church is following and obeying the Word. When that is gone, let men boast as much as they please: Church! Church! There is nothing in their boasting anyway. Therefore you should say: Do the people have the Word of God there? And do they accept it too?"² We can be the most gifted leaders in the world, but if we miss out on the Word of God, we have missed everything. Learn from Apollos on what a great leader looks like. Amen.

² Citation 780, from *What Luther Says* [Ewald M. Plass, ed, St. Louis: Concordia, 1959], p. 264.