

## Sermon 58, Ministry With and Without Paul, Acts 18:18-28

**Proposition:** The Kingdom, connected to its roots in the Bible and in Jerusalem, continues to grow in Asia and Achaia through ministers old and new.

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### Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, my younger self frequently lamented how short the book of Acts is. There is so much more I want to know about: Did Thomas reach India? Who was the first missionary in China? Did anyone advance up the Nile to the interior of Africa? What exactly happened to Peter and Paul, anyway? I really wished Luke had given us information on all of that, and more. A complete description of a worship service or ten would have been nice too, plus a chapter on what exactly has become of the Sabbath. I wanted to read all this stuff. But, in what I hope is a wiser understanding, I now realize that Luke's book is exactly the right length and covers what we need to know, rather than telling us what we don't really need to know. Luke can only give us so many variations on his basic plotline: "They entered the synagogue, taught, saw converts and opposition, and moved on to the next place." In

my opinion, Acts has exactly the right amount of that. There's enough that we can see how much of the Christian witness is just that, over and over again — and there is little enough that we're left wanting more instead of saying "How many times are we going to read that they entered another synagogue and saw more converts and more opposition?"

One of the ways Luke varies the narrative is by taking us on side trips with other characters. Paul is the main character right up to the end of the book, of course. But Luke is going to show here, in the second part of ch. 18, what ministry without Paul looks like. He's showing us ministry that actually looks more like what we usually do, showing us people whose abilities and giftings more in line with what's still found in the church rather than the off-the-charts gifts of Paul. Luke's point: The kingdom, connected to its roots in the Bible and Jerusalem, continues to grow not only through Paul's labors but also through the work of other faithful Christians.

### **I. Paul Heads Home, vv. 18-22**

Well, we have accompanied Paul through his whole second missionary journey, all his time walking across Turkey and ministering in Macedonia and Achaia. He's done now and ready to head home. How did he know that it was time to go? Luke doesn't say. Apparently Paul decided that he had done enough for one trip and that he needed to reconnect with his home church in Syrian Antioch.

#### **A. Making & Keeping a Vow, v. 18**

First, he goes down to the eastern port of Corinth, Cenchreae. There he cut his hair, because either he was making or had already made a vow. The Greek is not totally clear. The point is simply that, like the Nazirite described in Numbers 6, Paul had made a specific vow to God. What is Luke saying? That however far the Kingdom advances it never loses its rootedness in Scripture. The word defines what acceptable spirituality is; shaving one's head as part of a vow to God is specifically described in the Pentateuch. Though this chapter does not quote Scripture, it looks to Scripture. The ministry of Paul is based entirely on what the good book says, not on his own fancies or activities he made up out of his own head and decided were pleasing to God.

#### **B. Witness in Ephesus, vv. 19-20**

Paul keeps heading toward home, landing briefly in Ephesus with Priscilla and Aquila, who stay there. He goes into the synagogue, and gets a "tell us more." Usually in the synagogue he gets a "tell us less." But he's not distracted by the "tell us more." He walks away.

Would you have been able to do that? Would I be? I honestly don't know. But Paul was able to say "no" when he needed to. He had decided to go back home and even though the gospel need continued to be great, he took time to go back and greet the church that had sent him out. Folks, the word "retirement" may not be in the Bible but I think this is a great example of a servant of God taking a break so that he could be refreshed, reconnect with his supporters, and get ready to get back in the harness. Also, notice that he didn't promise to definitely come back to Ephesus. He said he would return if God willed.

Do you speak that way? Paul knew how to take a break and he knew how to commit his future to God. You need to know both of those lessons too.

### **C. Landing in Caesarea, v. 22a**

He goes to Caesarea.

### **D. Greetings in Jerusalem, v. 22b**

Then he goes up and connects with the Jerusalem church. Like the vow, this is narrated so briefly that we have a hard time drawing out the lesson. But here it is: the Kingdom, no matter how far it spreads, will never outgrow its roots in Jerusalem. The church has grown into that great mustard plant that covers the whole earth — and the church is still rooted in God's saving activity in the Holy Land, culminating in the crucifixion and resurrection of the Lord Jesus at Jerusalem. We will never outgrow that connection; we will never wean ourselves off that root. That doesn't mean that we all have to go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem and greet the church there like Paul did. But it does mean that we have to remember that our faith is about real events that happened in historical time in a real place that we can still visit. Just as the church remains always connected to the Bible, so it remains always connected to Jerusalem — the most prominent city in the Bible and the place where most of the crucial events happened.

### **E. Time in Antioch, v. 22c**

Then Paul finally gets back to Antioch and stays with the church for a time.

### **II. Paul Heads Out, v. 23**

Luke tells us that he heads out again and finally fulfills his plan for the second missionary journey — to go back and revisit all the churches from the first missionary journey and see how they're doing.

Clearly, the Kingdom is growing through Paul's work. And just as clearly, he can't do it all. Other people need to help.

### **III. Ministry in Ephesus without Paul, vv. 24-27a**

Well, that's exactly where Luke takes us. He takes the narrative back to Ephesus and shows us that three people ministered there in Paul's absence. The point is that the Kingdom is not limited to only one locale or only one minister. If Paul is killed, the church lives on.

### **A. Apollos**

Luke introduces to us, therefore, another church worker, a Jewish man named Apollos. This man, like many of the others we've encountered, is from a different province of the empire — as it turns out, from Alexandria, the second-largest and most prominent city in the Roman Empire. It is the Los Angeles to Rome's New York. Well, what five things does Luke tell us about Apollos? Five things that we too should imitate according to our place and calling.

#### **1. Eloquent**

The first of these is the gift of mighty and magnificent speech. This is something Shakespeare's characters have in abundance. It is something that Sir Walter Scott's immortal character Rebecca the Jewess has. And it was not something that Paul possessed. In other words, as gifts go, it is nice but not necessary. In the church, we can think of Gregory of Nazianzus, Augustine of Hippo, and Charles Haddon Spurgeon. These men possessed the gift of eloquence. They could speak powerfully and beautifully.

I do not believe that I possess this gift at a high level. I can speak clearly, but I do not have the ability to throw my words into overdrive and create a vista of overwhelming beauty in your imagination. But Apollos had this gift.

## **2. Mighty in the Scriptures**

But the second gift that Apollos had was, like that of the noble Bereans, one that all of us can and should strive for. Apollos, you see, was mighty in the Scriptures. What does that mean? It means that he knew the Bible inside out. If you asked him for relevant verses on any topic, he could quote them. If you asked him for help with knowing what the Bible taught on any issue, he was on top of it.

Sometimes you will talk to someone and say “That guy’s knowledge of Scripture is weak.” But you would never say that about Apollos. His knowledge of the word was mighty.

How do you get there? By reading, studying, meditating, listening, and using tools — sermons, books, efforts to memorize, and more.

## **3. Instructed**

Luke tells us another thing about Apollos, too: he had been instructed in the way of the Lord Jesus. He was not self-taught. He didn’t get to where he was by just reading and meditating on his own. He got there by being instructed.

If you are going to be effective as a disciple of Jesus Christ, you’ll need to be discipled by someone else. You will have to be taught. Isaiah 50 is our Lord’s statement that He Himself had the tongue of someone taught. Jesus was taught — by His Father. Apollos was taught. Luke doesn’t tell us who taught him, but the message is clear. Ministry is going on without Paul, and it is going on with people who know what they’re doing. The problem with self-taught people is that they had a bad teacher; the blessing of instructed people is that they are well-taught by God Himself through His church and the teachers that He has placed within it.

## **4. Fervent**

One thing about Apollos is that he combined great Biblical learning with strong passion for the things of God. He was fervent in Spirit — exactly what Paul tells all Christians to be in Romans 12. He was on fire for Jesus. Notice that Luke doesn’t seem to think that might in Biblical learning hampered Apollos in his ability to be on fire for Jesus. Rather, he sees the two as going together. Apollos knew God’s word well and he was very zealous for the cause of Christ. Again, this is an example of what we should be.

## **5. Accurate**

Luke tells us one final thing about ministry without Paul: Apollos taught accurately. Again, this is not separate from his fervency of spirit. It’s at least partially because he was fervent in spirit that he spoke and taught accurately about Jesus. What he said was true, precise, and correct. It was not a hasty generalization. It was not partially wrong. It was completely and entirely right. And without the fervency it would not have been right. What does Luke mean? I think he means this: The Christian message is so important, and so compelling, that it should provoke fervency in the spirit of the person who believes it. If I tell you in a dull tone of voice, like I don’t care, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who died to save sinners and rose from the dead, my words

contradict my tone. The message is so colossal that fervency of spirit is the only possible correct response.

Some people don't get excited about cars. Some people don't get excited about movies. Some people don't get excited about toys. That's all fine and good. Those things are not the be-all end-all of human existence. But the people who don't get excited about Christ's salvation are the people who do not understand the magnitude of what God has done. In that failure, they have departed from accuracy as well as fervency. Put another way, fervency is a key part of accuracy. If I present the message like I don't care about it, if Apollos presents the message like he doesn't care about it, then we are telling falsehoods. We have ceased to be accurate.

If you're looking for a pastor, make sure that he is instructed, mighty in the scriptures, fervent, and accurate. And if you're looking to be a faithful Christian, this isn't a bad description either. This is how ministry continues without Paul.

## **B. Priscilla & Aquila**

It also continues with Priscilla and Aquila. Their role is described very briefly.

### **1. Teaching Privately from Charity**

First, they both taught, though in private. The Scholastics call this teaching privately from charity, as opposed to teaching publicly from authority. Many feminists have said, "See, Priscilla knew more about Jesus than Apollos did, and she taught him!" So she did, and good thing too. No responsible conservative, biblicist, or complementarian can have the slightest problem with what Luke describes. The fact is, brothers and sisters, that there are many knowledgeable women in the church today. I could learn a great deal from women in this church. I have learned more than I can tell you from my mother, and a lot from my aunts and my sisters too. None of this is an argument for women's ordination — nor is it an argument for keeping women ignorant. As usual, we human beings tend to fall off the road on one side or the other. Priscilla taught Apollos privately, not publicly from authority. She did not teach from the pulpit in the name of Christ. She taught, perhaps at home, perhaps in a coffee shop or a side room of some other public space, in her own name and because she loved Apollos as a brother and wanted to explain the faith to him with greater accuracy.

Ladies, don't you ever think "Well, this man clearly knows less than I do, but it would be wrong for me to try to instruct him. Because he's male, I have to keep my mouth shut." Not true! Paul says *in the context of the church service* that he does not permit a woman to teach a man. He does not say that a woman cannot teach a man elsewhere. Such a statement is utter folly, and of course Paul knows it. This is why we sing hymns written by sisters in the context of church. This is why we read books written by women. This is why we educate our daughters and have them educate their sons. The point is not that a woman can or should do anything a man can do. The point is that women and men, and lay women and lay men, have the ability to instruct ministers, and ministers would do well to heed them.

### **2. Teaching More Accurately**

In particular, Priscilla and Aquila taught Apollos more accurately. He was already accurate; Luke just told us so in the previous verse! But he had some things to learn — for instance, more about

Christian baptism. Brothers and sisters, if there is any area where we could all grow in accuracy, it's the sacraments. They are the toughest area of theology. Apollos had some stuff to learn about baptism.

Accuracy is very important to Christianity. Why? Because we're not making this stuff up. We are passing on a deposit of faith we learned from those who know what they're talking about. And that's why accuracy is crucial.

### **C. The Brethren Writing to a Sister Church, v. 27a**

The final bit of ministry without Paul that Luke describes is the brethren sending a letter of recommendation for Apollos to Achaia. This ministry is something the church continues to do to this day, as various branches of the church recommend brothers to other branches of the church.

### **IV. Ministry in Achaia without Paul, vv. 27-28**

Indeed, the recommendation that was sent with Apollos proved to be quite accurate.

#### **A. Apollos a Great Help, v. 27b**

He was a major help to those who had believed through the grace of God. He assisted them in growing in their faith. He helped them become more like Christ. He made disciples, baptizing them and teaching them to follow Jesus. Paul describes it memorably: "I planted, Apollos watered." Apollos was out there working in the Lord's garden in Corinth, and perhaps elsewhere in Achaia too.

There are bad pastors out there. There are so-called disciple makers who don't help anyone walk with Jesus. Apollos was not one of those; he was a disciple maker who did a great deal to help others walk with Jesus.

#### **B. Apollos Powerfully Refutes the Jews, v. 28a**

One of his major ministry endeavors was the ministry of debating and arguing. That is a ministry calling to which we are rather allergic these days. Couldn't he have simply watered seeds and left the Jews alone? Luke doesn't seem to think so. One of the ways in which Apollos accurately taught the faith was by demonstrating conclusively that the Jews were wrong. These sorts of intellectual arguments are very important. For one thing, they help those who want to believe get over their scruples. A rational defense of the faith helps to clear the way for intellectually honest individuals to believe. Second, though, a defense of the faith leaves those who will not listen without excuse. Apollos showed that Judaism was incorrect. By its own terms, it should have accepted Jesus rather than rejecting Him.

#### **C. Apollos Demonstrates the Messiahship of Jesus, v. 28b**

That is the thing Apollos sought to demonstrate: Jesus was the Lord's Anointed One. He showed it from Scripture, as Paul did. Brothers and sisters, not all of us are called to be apologists. But I think all of us are called to know the Bible well enough to show from the Scriptures, and especially the Old Testament, that the known characteristics of Jesus of Nazareth fit the portrait of Messiah that the Pentateuch, prophets, and psalms draw.

Ministry went on without Paul. The church did not say "Oh no! Paul is gone. Guess spiritual growth stops now." On the contrary, brothers and sisters. Spiritual growth could and did continue without Paul through accurate teachers like Apollos, Priscilla, Aquila, and the multitude

of teachers, formal and informal, whom Christ continues to call into His church. Notice that Luke does not make a big deal about ordination or the lack thereof. That's because your approach to ministry should never start with "But what is my official position?" Your approach to ministry has to start with "What is the right thing to do here?" So far as we know, Apollos was no more ordained than Priscilla was — and neither of them let that stop them from ministering in the way appropriate to their places and callings.

So it should be in the church today. The Kingdom is advancing through ordinary church members and officers. Submit to it; follow Jesus in ministry. Amen.