

## Chapter 47: Many Gifts among Many Members

*Acts 18:18–28*

As the mission continues, something interesting happens in Acts 18:18. For the first time, we see people who are not full-time ministers of the gospel traveling along with Paul in his journeys. Previously, we have seen Barnabas, John Mark, Silas, and Timothy travel with Paul. In Acts 18:18, we read that Priscilla and Aquila (“tentmakers by trade”; Acts 18:3) traveled with Paul on his journey to Ephesus. These “fellow workers in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 16:3) play an especially important role once Paul must depart from Ephesus soon into his ministry there, even when a gifted minister named Apollos arrives. In Ephesus, Paul does not labor alone, but with fellow ministers and laymen who labor together for the gospel of Christ. Even today, *by many gifts among many members, God grows his church.*

### Planting Churches (Acts 18:18–23)

Luke writes “after this” (v. 18a) to refer back to the events in Corinth, when the proconsul Gallio declined to decide a case against Paul brought by the Jews, but when he also declined to intervene to protect Sosthenes from the abuse of those Jews in their frustration (Acts 18:12–17). Because of this, “Paul had no reason to leave Corinth in a hurry.”<sup>1</sup> Yet, after “Paul stayed many days longer,” he “then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila” (v. 18b). Paul’s colleagues in tent-making and ministry were willing to relocate with him not only for new business opportunities, but to advance the cause of the gospel, as we will see later in this passage. Again, we are seeing how the Lord uses ordinary people with ordinary trades to do real ministry for the gospel of Christ.

After this, Luke tells us that “At Cenchreae he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow” (v. 18c). It is possible, by the grammar of the sentence, that Paul refers to Aquila cutting his hair, since Aquila is the last man named before the word “he” appears without specifying the subject.<sup>2</sup> This interpretation, however, is unlikely. The more natural interpretation understands Paul as in view, so that the real questions become why Paul would have been under a vow, and what we should learn from this. It is possible that Paul made a Nazirite vow, during which he did not cut his hair in order to dedicate himself to the Lord’s work during his missionary efforts or, “perhaps in connection with his vision (Acts 18:9–10).<sup>3</sup> It is also possible that Paul made a private vow according to the general practices of “his Jewish heritage.”<sup>4</sup> Regardless of the nature of the vow, the “cutting of his hair

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<sup>1</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 761.

<sup>2</sup> So Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 762–63.

<sup>3</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 390.

<sup>4</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 586.

indicates that the period of his vow had come to an end.”<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, we are not told Paul’s precise purpose for his vow. Calvin probably makes the best argument in casting Paul’s vow in terms of his efforts to become a Jew to the Jews, not being under the law, but as one who was under the law, in order to gain those under the law (1 Cor. 9:20).<sup>6</sup> Paul insisted on freedom from the yoke of the ceremonial law; however, he continued to observe Jewish practices wherever it would give him inroads to reach Israel according to the flesh.

Still, Paul’s missionary efforts were not restricted to deeds or, much less, ceremonial gestures. Instead, when Paul, Priscilla, and Aquila “came to Ephesus,...he left them there, but he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews” (v. 19). Previously, the Holy Spirit had forbidden Paul to preach the gospel in Ephesus, which was a part of the region called “Asia” (Acts 16:6). Now, however, Paul has leave to enter the city and to establish the church, which became an important city in church history in many ways:

Paul founded the local congregation. Although he had been prevented from going to Ephesus in 16:6, the city was now open to him. Paul spent almost three years of his missionary activity here; Timothy became superintendent of the churches in the entire territory as Paul’s representative with headquarters in Ephesus; John spent his last years in this city and wrote his Gospel and his Epistles here. The third Ecumenical Council met here in 431 and defined the doctrine of the church against Nestorius.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, after a short time here, Paul insisted that he must continue on, but promised, “I will return to you if God wills” (v. 21).

To close out this section, Luke narrates Paul’s journey to Caesarea, where “he went up and greeted the church,” before going down to Antioch (v. 22). After time in Antioch, “he departed and went from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples” (v. 23). In Paul’s missionary activities, we see an instructive balance of preaching the gospel to new areas while also returning to established churches to strengthen the disciples. Biblical scholars consider Paul’s return to Antioch as the close of the second missionary journey, with Paul’s work to strengthen the disciples in Galatia and Phrygia as the beginning of the third missionary journey.<sup>8</sup>

## Watering Churches (Acts 18:24–28)

We come now to an important introduction in Acts: “Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures” (v. 24). First, we should see that, in God’s providential care for Ephesus, Apollos arrived as Paul departed.<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere, Paul will describe Apollos as a fellow servant who labored with him also in nearby Corinth: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth” (1 Cor. 3:6).

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<sup>5</sup> Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 377.

<sup>6</sup> Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:196.

<sup>7</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 764.

<sup>8</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 768.

<sup>9</sup> Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:199.

Second, it is important to understand the significance of Alexandria in Egypt in relation to Apollos's eloquence and competence in the Scriptures:

Two of this city's five sections were inhabited by Jews. It had a great university and a library and 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 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.<sup>10</sup>

This man's vivid understanding of the Old Testament Scriptures had at some point been connected with the revelation of Jesus as the long-awaited Christ of the Jews: "he had been instructed in the way of the Lord" (v. 25a). After coming to faith in Christ, he had devoted himself to preach Christ, "being fervent in spirit" (v. 25b). Yet, his understanding of Christ's fulfillment of the Old Testament promises, prophecies, and shadows was limited: "though he knew only the baptism of John" (v. 25c).

The phrase "baptism of John" does not refer narrowly to the practice of baptism itself.<sup>11</sup> In other words, this does not suggest that those who had been baptized by John need to be baptized again to fulfill the great commission of Jesus. Before becoming a disciple of Jesus, Peter's brother Andrew had formerly been a disciple of John (John 1:37–40). As a disciple of John, Andrew had presumably been baptized by John; however, we never read that he needed another water baptism, but only that they began baptizing disciples on Jesus' authority instead of John's (John 4:1–2). Certainly, Jesus himself did not receive another baptism except from John's, which was "fitting...to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15).

Instead, when Luke tells us that Apollos "knew only the baptism of John," he is pointing to an understanding of the preparatory role of John, who "baptized with a baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus" (Acts 19:4). Although others needed a baptism that took fully into account the person and work of the Holy Spirit after being baptized into John's baptism (Acts 19:2–6), Luke does not tell us that Apollos stood in similar need of baptism.

Instead of a correction in his baptism, Apollos needed correction in his preaching and teaching: "He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took

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<sup>10</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 769.

<sup>11</sup> "By 'the baptism of John' the whole teaching and work of the Baptist are referred to. The idea is not that he knew nothing about Christian baptism but that his knowledge did not extend to the completion of the work of Jesus. This, of course, included also the command to baptize all nations and the events that transpired at the time of Pentecost and later. A misleading contrast is introduced by regarding John's baptism as a mere *water baptism* over against the baptism of Jesus, either this itself (Matt. 28:19) or the so-called *Spirit baptism* at the time of Pentecost and what some today call "the baptism of the Spirit," an imaginary sudden seizure by the Spirit without means which produces total sanctification....To know only John's baptism was not to know about the crucifixion, the resurrection, the ascension, Pentecost, etc., not to know of the Lord's Supper, the first church at Jerusalem, the mission of the apostles, etc." (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 773.)

him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately” (v. 26). There is much to learn from this interaction. First, we learn something of the humility of Apollos. Though he was extraordinarily gifted, he was willing to listen to Priscilla and Aquila—especially since Luke’s listing Priscilla first suggests that she gave the primary feedback. Calvin writes, “this was no small modesty which was in Apollos, in that he doth suffer himself to be taught and instructed not only in [by] an handy-craftsman, but also by a woman. He was mighty in the Scripture, and did surpass them; but as touching the accomplishment of the kingdom of Christ, those do polish and trim him who might seem to be scarce fit ministers.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, what Luke writes should not be taken as justification for ordaining women as ministers. If that were the message, Apollos should have simply stepped aside to allow Priscilla to preach and teach! Yet, the willingness of Apollos to listen to what Priscilla had to say does teach that ministers are not above their congregations so as to insulate them from feedback and criticism. Instead, ministers should willingly receive correction from whosever mouth it may come.

Second, we see also the spirit of Priscilla and Aquila. They too loved the Lord, and they demonstrated their love for the Lord in traveling with Paul to help him in his missionary journeys. They did not go with him everywhere he went, but they were pleased to help establish the church in Ephesus. They did not want to take over the leadership of the church. Instead, they wanted to encourage and strengthen the leaders whom God had appointed for the church. Therefore, they spoke to him, but they did so in private. Bruce writes, “How much better it is to give such private help to a preacher whose ministry is defective than to correct or denounce him publicly!”<sup>13</sup> It was not only providential for the Lord to send Apollos to Ephesus upon Paul’s departure, but also for the Lord to provide Apollos with Priscilla and Aquila who could provide the much-needed adjustment to his teaching so that the church in Ephesus might flourish.<sup>14</sup>

Having received this correction, Apollos then traveled into Achaia, where he was warmly received by the church (v. 27a). Importantly, Achaia is the region where Corinth exists (Acts 19:1; 2 Cor. 1:1). Upon the arrival of Apollos in Achaia, “he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus” (vv. 27b–28). As for the word translated as “powerfully refuted,” it “appears only here in the NT” and “means to ‘overwhelm’ someone in argument.”<sup>15</sup> As an evangelist and an apologist for the faith, he made a powerful case that Jesus was the Messiah, which not only challenged the Jews but also strengthened the believers in their young and growing faith.

## Discussion Questions

1. What is unique for Priscilla and Aquila to accompany Paul on his journey to Ephesus (v. 18)? Who normally accompanies Paul on his missionary journeys? What gifts and skills do Priscilla and Aquila have (Acts 18:3)? Why do you think that they would make this journey, when their business had been in Corinth? What do we learn here about the ministry of ordinary members in the church?

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<sup>12</sup> Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:202.

<sup>13</sup> Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 382.

<sup>14</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 770.

<sup>15</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 593.

Is this the kind of role we commonly think of ordinary members taking?

2. What might the “vow” have been about that Luke describes in v. 18? How might this relate to Paul’s work among the Jews in the synagogue (v. 19)? Why do you think Paul might have felt that he must leave Ephesus (v. 20)? When Paul leaves, who remains to lead and support the fledgling church? How do you think these individuals felt about their role in caring for this young church? How do you think God ultimately used them?

3. Who was Apollos (v. 24a)? What was significant about Alexandria (v. 24b)? What kinds of gifts and abilities did this man have (v. 24c)? What did he know about Jesus (v. 25a)? What didn’t he know about Jesus (v. 25b)? What ministry and leadership role did he take within the church in Ephesus (v. 26)? How did Priscilla and Aquila serve Apollos in his ministry (v. 26)? What kind of benefit did the whole church gain from their correcting him (vv. 27–28)?

4. What role do you have in serving the body of Christ? What do we learn from this passage about how the Lord uses ordinary members of his church? What was the ministry relationship between Paul and Apollos in Ephesus? How does 1 Corinthians 3 help us to understand how Paul viewed Apollos’s work? What does this tell us about the role of different ministers in a single congregation over time? How does this glorify Christ rather than the ministers?