

In the Hands of Tentmakers

Acts 18:24-28

Introduction

I read something recently that I thought would make a good introduction to our study today. With approximately one pound of iron, a simple rod can be fashioned that can be used to stake down heavy planks or for other similar tasks. This iron rod can be purchased for \$.49. However, if this same amount of iron is fashioned into a horseshoe, its value goes up to \$10.00. If this much iron is turned into sewing needles, its value skyrockets to \$1,000.00. If this rod of iron is placed into the hands of Swiss watchmakers, it can be turned into finely crafted, balanced springs for expensive Swiss watches, and its value would then be \$100,000.00. The value depends on whose hands craft the raw material.

In our study through Acts, we encounter a moment when the raw material of a new believer is placed into the hands of seasoned saints. It is a remarkable story and you will probably discover, as I did, that a lot more went on behind the scenes than meets the eye at first glance.

Return with me to our study through the book of Acts, where we will discuss the final paragraph of chapter 18.

What Apollos Had

Look at verses 24 and 25 of Acts, chapter 18.
Now a Jew named Apollos, an Alexandrian by birth, an eloquent man, came to Ephesus; and he was mighty in the Scriptures. This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he was speaking and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus, being acquainted only with the baptism of John;

In terms of raw material, Apollos obviously had a lot going for him. Let us briefly catalog what Apollos had.

Apollos had an enviable heritage

1. First, Apollos had an enviable heritage.

The text informs us that he was an Alexandrian by birth. Whenever Luke added to the biographical background of an individual that he was highlighting, it was not because he needed to use up some ink he spilled. Luke added background information because it was significant in setting the stage for the information to follow.

Apollos was born in the proud city named after Alexander the Great. It was the second largest city in the Roman Empire. Alexandria was a university town which claimed a library of 700,000 volumes. The city of Alexandria was world renowned for its learning.

Apollos had an eloquent tongue

2. Evidently Apollos personally benefited from this environment, as secondly, the Bible says that Apollos had an eloquent tongue; he was an eloquent man.

The word “eloquent” literally translated means, “a man of words”. This could refer to either eloquence (“logia” or words), or reasoning power (“logios,” which could be understood as logic). It is evident from the rest of this paragraph, that Apollos had both!

Apollos had an educated mind

3. Thirdly, notice in verse 24b that Apollos, “was mighty in the Scriptures”; that is, he had an educated mind.

Notice verse 25a.

This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord . . .

Now, in most university towns, like ours, the educated, sophisticated people are not usually mighty in the scriptures. They are most often mighty *against* the scriptures.

How did Apollos receive training in the Old Testament scriptures? The first phrase tells us that he had been instructed in the way of the Lord.

Part of the answer lies in the fact that, because of the large Jewish population in Alexandria, an enormous synagogue had been built. It was so large that a “hazzan” or synagogue leader had to stand on a platform in the middle of it to signal with a flag to let those in the back know when to join in the “Amen’s”. Evidently they could not afford video imaging!

Can you imagine a synagogue like that?

Biblical scholars estimate that about one million Jews lived in Egypt where they spoke the Greek language. In fact, it was from Alexandria that the Jewish leaders translated the Old Testament Hebrew Bible into a Greek text that we know as the *Septuagint*.

By the way, the Alexandrian text family that was carefully preserved by the Jews in this region, form the basis of manuscripts for the translation you may have, the popular New International Version and also, the New American Standard for the more diligent Bible students!

We also know that Philo, the Jewish scholar, lived in Alexandria during the childhood of Apollos. Many believe that Apollos, being the brilliant young man that he was, had been one of Philo’s students.

So in this university town, Apollos was infected with this insatiable desire to know the scriptures and also to worship the God who authored the scriptures.

Oh for more people in the church today, to be characterized as “mighty in the scriptures”.

We live in a land today where churches do not teach the word, and people do not know the word. We are surrounded by translations of the word, yet few Christians actually read the word.

We need men and women who are mighty in the scriptures. Church leaders are to seriously apply the commission of the Lord, as recorded in Matthew, chapter 28, verses 19 and 20,

Go . . . and make disciples . . . teaching them to observe all that I commanded you . . .

And they are to follow the exhortation of Paul to Timothy, in II Timothy, chapter 2, verse 2,

The [biblical] things which you have heard from me . . . entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

That is the business of the church. Yet, as my father recently said to me, “It seems that the church is the only business that stays in business even after it’s gone out of business.”

We need an avalanche of Apolloses to sweep into the church. We need men and women, young and old, who are mighty in the scriptures.

Apollos had an enthusiastic spirit

4. Finally, Apollos had an enthusiastic spirit.

The next description of Apollos occurs in verse 25.

. . . being fervent in spirit . . .

The word “fervent” comes from the Greek word “zeo” or zealous. It could be translated literally, “he was boiling over in his spirit”.

Whatever Apollos learned, he delivered. He translated everything of life into what he wanted to say to someone else. He was always on the lookout for an opportunity to teach what he knew.

If you are a teacher, you know what that is like. My wife and I were at the store a few days ago, looking at Valentine’s cards together – not for each other! We were reading them and came across one that had an interesting twist. Marsha, not me, actually said, “Honey, this card would make a great sermon illustration.”

Some of you are thinking, “Is it too late to rescue Marsha? She’s lived with Stephen too long!”

Hey, I like the way she is thinking, and I bought that card! And I am going to make you listen to it one day!

If you teach a class, prepare a lecture, or lead a study group, you get used to that kind of thinking, right? You have become a little more like Apollos. You learn so that you can help others to learn. You gather facts so that you can give them away. Your desire is not simply to study, but to study so that you can help other students of the word.

Apollos was, in verse 25b,

. . . fervent [boiling over] in spirit, he was speaking and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus . . .

This is what Apollos had. This was the raw material in the life of a young man who could be used by God in incredible ways in the early church.

What Apollos Missed

Now let me tell what Apollos missed. There is one very big problem.

Notice what Apollos missed, in the last phrase of verse 25,

. . . being acquainted only with the baptism of John;

Continue to verse 26.

and he began to speak out boldly in the synagogue. But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.

The phrase “the baptism of John” is, I believe, a kind of categorical expression that represented all of the teaching of the Old Testament prophet that we know as John the Baptist. So, in other words, Apollos taught about Jesus Christ accurately, but only from what he knew about Jesus from the Old Testament and the prophet John.

Apollos would have known that Jesus Christ was the Messiah and that He had come as the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the world. John said that himself, as he introduced Christ to the Jewish nation.

Apollos would have known that Christ was the God-Man who had come to crush the head of the serpent to satisfy the wrath of God, and to rise from the dead as David prophesied of the Messiah centuries earlier.

However, Apollos was missing:

- the significance of Pentecost;
- the coming of the Holy Spirit;
- the birth of the church;
- the transition from Old Covenant to New Covenant;
- the invitation of the gospel to Gentile nations;
- the primacy of grace in the gospel.

Warren Weirsbe wrote, “It wasn’t that Apollos’ message was inaccurate or insincere; it was just incomplete.”

Apollos was an Old Testament believer, not yet a New Testament Christian. Remember, we are in a transition period – Acts is the bridge between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant.

The key phrase, the hinge verse that changes the future of Apollos, is the last part of verse 26. Look at that verse again.

. . . But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.

This brief phrase spells the difference in Apollos’ life.

What a wonderful illustration in the ministry of discipleship we have in the phrase, “they took him aside. . .” They did not embarrass him in front of anyone. They waited until after the service.

Can you see Priscilla and Aquila during Apollos’ sermon? They are giving each other side glances. They know he has missed the full picture. After the last benediction, they went up to him and invited him to their home for Sabbath dinner.

The phrase “they took him aside” is a beautiful phrase that when translated woodenly, would read, “they took him to themselves.”

At this moment, the raw iron of Apollos’ life was placed into the hands of two tentmakers. Frankly, at this moment, he is worth less than \$.49. In fact, in light of what he does not know about the plan of God developing at light speed, he is worthless to the New Testament church.

Yet, when they finish the discipleship process, and we are not told how long they took, you will find Apollos fashioned into a rare and unusual servant of God, powerfully used in the church.

Now it is up to Apollos. How will he respond? Will he listen?

Think about the likelihood. If you could have imagined who God would use to challenge Apollos and bring him to the truth of the New Covenant, you would have never picked this couple. Look at the differences between Priscilla and Aquila and Apollos:

- They were an older couple, he was a young man.
- They were married, he was single.

- They were uneducated, he was an educated, brilliant intellectual.
- They made tents for a living, he was wealthy enough to travel throughout Europe.

If discipleship works, if a church is to work well together, don't you put people together who are alike? No, you simply put people together who love Jesus Christ and His church, and in so doing, you find all the common ground you need.

The question is, "Would Apollos listen?"

Evidently he did, and he becomes an example of what it takes to grow up spiritually; to develop in God's word.

Four ways spiritual growth occurs

Apollos demonstrated at least four different ways that spiritual growth occurs. Let me give them to you.

When you are not so knowledgeable that you cannot learn more

1. The first is, when you are not so knowledgeable that you cannot learn more!

When you are not so proud that you cannot admit you are wrong

2. Secondly, when you are not so proud that you cannot admit you are wrong!

How do you respond when someone tells you that you have been misled, that you are uninformed, or that you have a blind spot in your life? It is at moments like that when spiritual growth is either stunted or spurred on.

When you are not so important that you cannot listen to others

3. Thirdly, spiritual growth occurs when you are not so important that you cannot listen to others!

Can you see the eloquent, brilliant, highly respected Apollos sitting at the kitchen table with this dear couple repeating over and over again, "I didn't know, it's embarrassing. I just didn't know all that had happened these past few years. Man, was I ever in the dark."

When you are not so cultured that you cannot change

4. Fourthly, when you are not so cultured that you cannot change!

Benjamin Disraeli said, "Talk to a man about himself and he will most likely listen for hours."

I would add, "Talk to a man about how he should change, and he will most likely listen for just a few minutes."

Not Apollos, however! He allowed the iron in his soul to be refashioned, melted down, twisted and turned into something, and he himself into someone with a totally different perspective, a totally new passion.

If you look, in fact, at chapter 19, verse 1, you discover that Apollos picks up the ministry that Paul left off at Corinth. The passionate zeal of Apollos has added to it the necessary knowledge of the gospel message of the New Testament church.

Application

I want to make two applications to our own lives; to our own spiritual ministry and maturity. Let me give two observations.

Observation #1 – Oftentimes, the most powerful development in an individual's life is accomplished by ordinary people

1. The first observation is that oftentimes, the most powerful development in an individual's life is accomplished by ordinary people.

You would think that if Apollos was to learn anything, it would be at the hand of Paul, Timothy, or an apostle from Jerusalem. They would fly some expert discipler in Antioch, not an uneducated couple who made tents for a living. And yet, in the plan of God, as is so often the case, ordinary people were used to make an unusual impact.

Can you remember some who have impacted you for Christ? I remember a fifth grade teacher who took an interest in me, a piano teacher who lived for Christ even though her husband cared little for Christ, and a college professor who never tired of me knocking on his door and asking him questions about the Christian life and ministry.

These are ordinary people who have an unusual impact.

Observation #2 – Oftentimes, the most powerful contribution to the cause of Christ is accomplished behind the scenes

2. The second observation is that oftentimes, the most powerful contribution to the cause of Christ is accomplished behind the scenes.

Where would the church be without two people who cared enough to confront and disciple?

Certainly the spotlight of church history would focus on Apollos; so much so that he would rival the apostle Paul. The early church in Corinth had developed a following of Apollos so large that Paul himself mentioned that some were following him and some were following Apollos.

The truth is, without Priscilla and Aquila, Apollos would have eventually shipwrecked on the rocks of unorthodoxy. With the circulation of Paul's letters to the churches, Apollos would have been embarrassed into silence, or worse yet, established an aberrant sect within the church.

In a humble cottage, away from the spotlight, behind the scenes, God did a great work in the life of a man who was big enough to listen and wise enough to know he needed to learn some basic truths.

Three questions to answer

May I ask you three questions? If you would like to be like Apollos, answer these questions.

Are you teachable or stubborn?

1. Are you teachable or stubborn?

Think back to the last time someone challenged your thinking. What was your response? Did you put on boxing gloves, and think, "Well, what do they think they know? What right do they have to challenge me?"

Are you cliquish or open hearted?

2. Are you cliquish or open hearted?

Maybe God wants to teach you something, but it is coming from someone you think is less important than you or is less attractive to your tastes. Surely, if God wanted your attention, He would send someone along that you would naturally respect and admire.

That is nothing less than spiritual snobbery. So you form a group around you of people that you consider worthy of instructing you; worthy of influencing you. But you have simply gathered

around yourself a form of self-protection from learning life-changing, life-upsetting, transforming, iron-melting truth.

Are you willing to change when confronted, or do you just quit?

3. Are you willing to change when confronted, or do you just quit?

When confronted, do you think, "I'll just get a new friend. I'll go to a different church. I'll quit this job and get another one. I'm not comfortable around these people anymore."?

The only way you could take a cheap rod of iron and turn it into exquisite, finely crafted watch springs, would be to melt it down and totally refashion it. Isn't that what is supposed to be happening to us? As II Corinthians, chapter 5, verse 17, says,

. . . if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.

That sounds like refashioning to me.

The Bible has another word for it – transformation.

Romans, chapter 12, verse 2, says,

. . . but be transformed by the renewing of your mind . . .

II Corinthians, chapter 3, verse 18, says,

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image . . .

Perhaps you have been feeling the heat lately. God is in the process of transforming you from independent to dependent; from self-sufficient to needy of His grace and wisdom.

Well, Apollos was transformed from ineffective to effective; from in the dark to entrusted with the light of the gospel of Christ.

Notice verses 27 and 28.

And when he wanted to go across to Achaia, the brethren encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him; . . .

(This is the first inter-church letter of commendation, by the way. It is the basis for our custom today, of transferring membership between churches of like faith and practice by means of a letter.)

. . . and when he had arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, demonstrating by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.

To what did he owe this wonderful ministry? To whom did the church owe a debt of gratitude for this dynamic servant of Christ?

Two tentmakers, a Sabbath afternoon, a simple lunch, a large serving of humble pie, a series of caring conversations – and the cause of Jesus Christ took another step in the right direction.

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