



Catalog No. 1271

Acts 18:18–19:7

Twenty-ninth Message

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March 26th, 2006

THE MISSING ELEMENT

SERIES: THE SPREADING FLAME

The apostle Paul spent almost two years in Corinth before he moved on to Ephesus, where he would spend three years. In our text from the book of Acts this morning we will look at two events. The first involves the story of Apollos and the ministry of Priscilla and Aquila in this man's life, while the second concerns a group of 12 men whom Paul meets upon his arrival in Ephesus. Both of these stories involve one of the greatest challenges in ministry, i.e., introducing religious people to the grace and power of the indwelling Christ.

First, Luke summarizes in a brief, condensed narrative (a mere six verses), many months of ministry and thousands of miles, tracing Paul's travels from Corinth to Ephesus, Caesarea, Jerusalem, Antioch, and back through Galatia to Ephesus again, as the apostle concludes his second missionary journey and begins his third. The narrative is condensed either because Luke's information is limited (he is still in Philippi), or more likely, his purpose is to simply get Paul from Achaia to Asia, from Corinth to Ephesus, without dwelling on the intervening months of travel.

Paul, having remained many days longer, took leave of the brethren and put out to sea for Syria and with him were Priscilla and Aquila. In Cenchrea he had his hair cut, for he was keeping a vow. They came to Ephesus, and he left them there. Now he himself entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. When they asked him to stay for a longer time, he did not consent, but taking leave of them and saying, "I will return to you again if God wills," he set sail from Ephesus. When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and went down to Antioch. And having spent some time there, he left and passed successively through the Galatian region and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples. (Acts 18:18-23 NASB)

Due to Gallio's favorable ruling, Paul is able to remain ministering in Corinth. After some time elapses he sets off to return to Antioch, where his journey started, taking Priscilla and Aquila with him, and making a number of stops along the way. Before setting sail, Paul gets a haircut. Apparently he had taken a Nazarite vow. He was still a Jew culturally, although a Christian in his thinking. He still practiced Judaism, but now it had new significance. He might have taken the vow following either of his visions in Macedonia or Corinth, beseeching God for success in the mission to which he was called. If that is what happened, in thanksgiving, Paul ends the vow, thus recognizing that the Lord had made good on his promises.

Possibly in anticipation of future ministry, he makes a quick trip to Ephesus, leaving Priscilla and Aquila there. Following a brief ministry in the synagogue, he is asked to stay longer, but he refuses. It's possible he had some time constraints. He may have been trying to get to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover, in late March or early April, and the sea-lanes didn't open until mid March. He sets sail from Ephesus, arrives at Caesarea, goes up to greet the church in Jerusalem, and then returns home to Antioch, the sending church for his second missionary journey.

While there, Paul would have reported on his second journey, as he did when he returned from his first. After he had spent some time in Antioch, "he left and passed successively through the Galatian region and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples" (18:23). These words mark the beginning of his third and final missionary journey. Luke does not give many details concerning this journey of about 1500–1700 miles as Paul returns by way of the churches in Galatia, which he founded on his first trip to Turkey. Perhaps the reason for the brevity is that Luke's interest shifts from the journeys themselves, to the establishing of the very significant church at Ephesus. Paul had some brief success there at the end of the second missionary journey. He left Priscilla and Aquila there in hopes of returning. Therefore, on his third journey he returns again to Ephesus, where he will spend three years, the longest period of ministry in any place he visited.

This brings us to the story of Apollos. The scene shifts from Paul the apostle to this bright young man Apollos. Luke records an incident that took place during the many months that had intervened since he left Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus and returned to Antioch.

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; 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. (18:24-26)

Luke introduces Apollos here because he played such a significant role in the growth of the early church. Writing to the Corinthians later, Paul would describe his ministry as one of teaching, he was the one who "watered" in Corinth. His earlier

ministry was more apologetic (working with Jews), and he had a powerful ministry of refuting.

Luke tells us a little about Apollos. He was a Jew from Alexandria, a city of scholars which would become an intellectual center for Christianity, producing some of the greatest scholars of early Christianity (notably Clement and Origen). The city had a large Jewish population. It was here that the Septuagint (LXX) had been produced some 200 years before Christ, and here that the great scholar Philo, Jesus' contemporary, lived and worked.

Luke describes Apollos as a learned man, an eloquent, articulate spokesman, "mighty in the Scriptures," i.e., the Old Testament. Apollos had some contact with John the Baptist, but his information was limited. We couldn't describe him in the same way as Paul's does other converts, because he had not yet heard about Jesus' death, burial and resurrection. If he did know some of those facts, he didn't understand their meaning. The only information he had was from the followers of John the Baptist, who awakened people to their need for a Messiah, pointing out that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. John baptized people as a "sign of repentance," as he put it.

Baptism at that point was for Gentiles who wanted to become Jews, people who had changed their minds about living a pagan lifestyle and were baptized as a sign of their identification with God's people. The unique thing about John the Baptist's ministry was that he was telling Jews they needed to be baptized; they weren't a part of the believing remnant.

John's ministry was preparatory to the coming of Christ, so it was not complete. This too was the ministry that Apollos had. As an intellectual from Alexandria, he probably had trained in rabbinic schools and was permitted to teach in the synagogues there. In Ephesus, he began to teach the Jews that Jesus was that Messiah, and that they needed to be baptized as a sign of that change of mind about Jesus. That was all he knew.

On that particular morning, Aquila and Priscilla heard him speak, and immediately they were impressed and drawn by his intellect and gifts. He preached accurately about the things concerning Jesus, but they recognized that there was something missing, his theology was incomplete. So they invited him home for dinner and explained to him, as Luke says, the "way of God more accurately." I'm not sure which is more amazing, this couple's graciousness or Apollos's humility.

Notice Priscilla and Aquila's gentleness is correcting Apollos privately, not publicly. Here are these two dear Christians who are not that old in the Lord themselves. Paul had led them to Christ in Corinth. They don't criticize Apollos publicly for his incomplete preaching. They don't reject or debate him. They don't write articles about his heretical teaching and put them on the Internet. Instead, they simply invite him home to dinner and, in the warmth of that accepting environment, teach him what was lacking in his theology.

And notice the teachable heart of Apollos. Here is a well-read, educated, cultured man, with a doctorate in theology, wearing his academic robes, sitting across the table from Priscilla and Aquila, laborers who made tents for a living. They were probably not well educated at all; they may have had the equivalent of an eighth grade education. Theirs were the hardened hands of tradesmen. But Apollos has the humility to realize that they had something to teach them. What amazing news it must have been to him that the message of John had now been fulfilled; that the one whom John had baptized had gone on to fulfill all that God had ever predicted concerning the way of salvation for men. The implications of the cross, the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit were all explained to Apollos.

His teachable heart is so encouraging! May that be true of all of us. We must be teachable. Discipleship is always mutual. It's never a one-way street. In spite of the fact that Apollos was learned and mighty in the Scriptures, he was willing to be taught by this couple. As James reminds us: "the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, easy to be entreated." It is teachable, not defensive.

Naturally, Apollos needed time to digest these facts and re-think everything. After he was taught by Priscilla and Aquila, he traveled to Achaia, to Corinth.

And when he wanted to go across to Achaia, the brethren encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him; 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. (18:27-28)

Paul had established the thriving, gifted church in Corinth, and they needed someone like Apollos who could carry on the work. In the apostle's first letter to the church there he describes Apollos as a waterer of the seeds that he had planted: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase." Apollos went on to have a significant ministry in that city. In fact, he grew to be even more popular than Paul, and as a consequence various schisms developed in the church. He was so popular that a large number of people gathered around him, with the result that some reacted to his popularity negatively, saying, "No, we are of Paul."

This wasn't Apollos' doing; he didn't want that to happen. We have to be careful. It is natural to be attracted to someone's intellect, charisma or personality that makes a ministry powerful. This almost resulted in the destruction of the church in Corinth. So Apollos left there, returning to Ephesus and becoming associated with Paul's ministry. We don't hear of him again until much later when he was the messenger who delivered the New Testament book of Titus to the recipient, who was in Crete.

Having introduced Apollos, Luke goes on to note one of the results of this man's pre-Christian teaching. Arriving in Ephesus, Paul finds some disciples. In reality, however, they

were disciples of John the Baptist. They seemed to have the same defective theology as Apollos had (they were probably taught by him).

And it came about that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper country came to Ephesus, and found some disciples, He said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they said to him, “No, we have not even heard whether there is a Holy Spirit.” And he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” And they said, “Into John’s baptism.” Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus.” When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking with tongues and prophesying. There were in all about twelve men. (19:1-7)

Paul had made his way across the interior of Turkey, down to Ephesus. There was no church per se at this point in history, but the apostle found 12 men who seemed to have some knowledge of Jesus. He realized that their understanding was incomplete. It was partial and therefore defective in some sense. He asks them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” In Paul’s mind, one certain mark of salvation was the presence of the Holy Spirit. This was the sign that denoted one who had become a believer in Jesus Christ.

This does not happen subsequent to salvation. It isn’t the result of a second blessing. It occurs when one believes. In fact, Paul would later write to these Ephesian believers that the Holy Spirit is the seal, the identifying mark of our inheritance. Whenever God sees the Holy Spirit resident in an individual, that is the mark of someone who belongs to him. That is what a seal represented in those days—a mark of ownership. The same is true today. As the Lord looks over us this morning he sees the presence of the Holy Spirit in us as the mark that we are his. That is the identifying sign that we can recognize as well. It isn’t something that is immediately observable to the physical eye. But whenever the Spirit of God is resident in the life of an individual, the marks of that residency ultimately begin to show. It is what Paul calls in his letter to the Galatian church, the “fruit of the Spirit”: love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, and self-control. Those are the evidences of the work of the Spirit of God inside us.

Talking with these believers, Paul sensed that something was missing. This is almost certainly a shortened account of this conversation. To his question as to whether they had received the Holy Spirit when they believed, they replied that they didn’t know the Holy Spirit had been given. The NASB and other translations say their response was that they didn’t even know if there was a Holy Spirit. All the text literally says is, “We don’t know if the Holy Spirit is.” This is a difficult text to interpret.

As Jews, they almost certainly knew that the Holy Spirit existed. The prophet Joel predicted the pouring out of the Spirit upon all flesh when the Messiah came. If they were followers of John the Baptist, they would have heard him say, “I baptize you with water, but when the Messiah comes he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” They knew about the Holy Spirit, but they didn’t realize that the Messianic age had actually begun. They didn’t know anything about Pentecost.

Paul proceeded to tell them about Jesus’ ministry and life, about his death, burial and resurrection. He told them about the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on all flesh as a sign that the Messiah had indeed come. They believed Paul, and they were baptized as a sign of that belief. They had already been baptized once, but they are baptized a second time because baptism had significance to them now as Christians. And when they believed, the same thing that had happened to the apostles and those 120 others on the Day of Pentecost occurred again: the Holy Spirit was poured out. That could not be seen with the eye, so signs were given, in this case speaking in tongues and prophesying, to indicate that something had happened.

This is exactly what had occurred on the Day of Pentecost, when the Spirit of God was poured out on the disciples in the Upper Room and they spilled out into the streets of Jerusalem, speaking in foreign languages. It wasn’t ecstatic utterances or an angelic language, but a language that could be understood by one who spoke that language. There were people there from all over the known world, Mesopotamia, Persia, North Africa, Turkey, Italy, who heard the gospel in their own language. They proclaimed that they heard these men praising God in their own languages. What better sign could God have given to a group of provincial, ethnocentric Jews, who were just thinking about themselves and their nation, that God was reaching out and including the whole world. It was a sign that the Messiah had come. It was repeated in Samaria in Acts 10, when Peter was preaching the gospel to Cornelius. Now it is repeated again here in Ephesus. There is no other instance of this happening again in the book of Acts; there was no need for it to happen again.

Today, the mark of the pouring out of the Spirit is not the ability to speak in a foreign language, but what Paul calls in Galatians, the “fruit of the Spirit,” the marks of God’s character that over time begin to exhibit themselves in those who believe. This marks the effects that we have on the world when we make contact with our non-Christian and Christian friends, as we make an impact on their life. Jesus said in John 7: “If any man is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. “He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, ‘From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water.’ But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive.”

That is the mark today of a Spirit-filled man or woman, as the living water that flows out of us begins to have an impact on others. Their hungers and thirsts are quenched as we exhib-

it God's love and grace and speak his truth. That is what happened to these 12 men in Ephesus. They became the nucleus of a church that exploded out of Ephesus, penetrating into the surrounding cities mentioned in Revelation—Philadelphia, Sardis, Laodicea and all the other churches mentioned there.

As I reflect on these two stories of Apollos and these 12 men in Ephesus, and the ministry of Aquila and Priscilla and the apostle Paul, I am touched by two things. The first thing is, the power of simply taking the initiative to care about someone else's spiritual life and inviting them to a meal for the purpose of encouraging them in their faith.

There are hundreds of people attending this church who are all over the map in terms of maturity and theology. And there are some among us who are like those 12 men in Ephesus: they know nothing about the power of the Holy Spirit. Their understanding of Christianity involves going to church, being involved in a few programs, or perhaps giving some money. They know nothing of the freshness, the excitement and the vitality of life we were created to experience when the Holy Spirit is present in our lives.

Then there are those among and around us who are not Christian at all but who are more than willing to talk about Christianity, because God has been working in their lives. My exhortation is for you to ask God to give you someone like that, and then take him or her to lunch and share the gospel. If they know the Lord, then make a commitment to care for them and help them grow in their faith. Maybe you will decide to meet together weekly to read the Bible and pray for each other. We shy away from this because we feel we need to have all the answers and be really mature before we can do that. We think we have to disciple someone. We wonder what we will have to say. But anyone can greet a friend and say, "We both need to grow. Let's meet together on a regular basis to study the Bible and encourage each other."

Recently, I had the joy of sharing with a couple of women in our church who are doing this very thing. They meet with other women each week to study and encourage and pray for each other. They wanted to know more about how to study the Bible on their own. It was so exciting to see their hunger as I shared a few tools with them.

Don't be afraid if God puts on your heart someone who may be smarter than you or knows more about the Scriptures than you. They may be struggling with an area of their life that you can help. It doesn't matter. Make that commitment.

There is a second thing that I am touched by in this passage. There may be some here this morning, like the disciples in Ephesus, who have no understanding of the purpose and the power of the Holy Spirit. Your idea of what it means to be a Christian is trying harder to be good. You live for the Lord rather than by his power. You have domesticated the good news into a set of rules and regulations that can be met by little contact with or need for the Lord. As a result, your Christianity is much like practical agnosticism. You carry all the pressures and demands of life, all the pain and heartaches as if Calvary and Pentecost never happened.

If that describes you, I want you to know there is more. The last thing I want to do is place any more guilt on you. There is more to life than you have been living. Jesus is alive! He wants to remove that burden from you. In the beautiful freedom of forgiveness because of his cross, Jesus wants to live within you, to have you discover the excitement, adventure and joy of following the Holy Spirit's leadership, transforming your inward life. There are lots of people here who can help and encourage you in that journey.

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