

The Necessity of Gospel Clarity (Part 1)

Acts: The Spirit Moving / Acts 18:18-28 / March 1, 2026

Introduction:

Imagine traveling by train in the early 1900s where conductors would walk the cars to announce important stops. Shortly after the trip begins, the conductor makes an announcement: “This train will be heading to a great city—a place of opportunity, life, and promise.” You decide to change your plans to go to that city. But the conductor failed to mention the need to transfer to a connecting train at an upcoming stop to reach that city. Hours later the train stops at a station. Those who know of the connecting train exit, but you remain seated. Eventually the train reaches the end of its line, and you step onto the platform, confused because it wasn’t the city you expected. The problem was simple: you heard some truth about the destination, but not everything necessary to arrive there. A partial message leaves people confident they are on the right path while missing something essential. This illustrates the problem of the stories in Acts 18:16-19:10 we will cover over the next two weeks as Luke moves through each, referencing John’s baptism and progressing in tension, to stress the necessity of gospel clarity. We’ll cover Acts 18:16-24 today and Acts 19:1-10 next week. Consider how Luke sets the stage in verses 18-23. Look at verse 18, “After this, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila. At Cenchreae he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow.” Note how God’s Word and the fulfillment of His promise strengthened Paul. In verses 9-10, Jesus spoke to Paul’s fear in a vision, encouraging him to speak boldly because Jesus was with him and no harm would come because there were many who belonged to Christ in Corinth. Following that promise, the proconsul protects Paul before the tribunal and we see, “Paul stayed many days longer.” This was likely around nine months. Not only did he stay in Corinth, but he found new ministry partners in Priscilla and Aquila, taking them with him when he left. We’ll consider them in a moment. For now, dwell on how God’s faithfulness strengthened Paul. The comment of his hair cut and vow appears to highlight this more. Many believe this either signifies the end of a Nazarite vow Paul entered while afraid, or it’s beginning because Paul was thankful and committed to trust the vision. Whether this was the beginning or end, the point is the same. Paul was powerfully strengthened through Jesus’ promise. Family, the fight of faith is a fight to trust in God’s real promises. Before I digress into a different sermon, continue in verses 19-23, “And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there, but he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. When they asked him to stay for a longer period, he declined. But on taking leave of them he said, ‘I will return to you if God wills,’ and he set sail from Ephesus. When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and then went down to Antioch. After spending some time there, he departed and went from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.” Follow Luke’s quick narration of Paul’s travels. Upon arrival in Ephesus, Paul leaves Priscilla and Aquila and immediately enters the synagogue to proclaim the gospel. It’s unclear if the response is favorable, but Paul moves on with the hope of returning if God wills. From there Luke moves quickly—summarizing Paul’s visit to Jerusalem (that is what is meant by “he went up”) and Antioch before showing him traveling back through Galatia and Phrygia to strengthen the disciples. Note how the narration ends with Paul strengthening the disciples in the areas he had already established churches. This continues Paul’s balanced efforts of making and strengthening disciples, showing both are key to kingdom advancement. Then, Luke transitions to the main part of this story. Look at verse 24, “Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus.” Pause and note a couple of things. First, Luke’s takes us back to Ephesus and introduces a new character, Apollos. Second, he details Apollos’ ethnic heritage and birthplace. David Peterson details the significance of Alexandria, noting how it, “was ‘the leading intellectual and cultural center of the Hellenistic world, built around a massive museum and 400,000-volume library.’” And “It was in Alexandria that Jewish scholars had produced the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures called the Septuagint (LXX).” So, Apollos is a Jew from a city famous for its learning and the place where the Greek translation of the Old Testament was produced.

That background prepares us for the problem that emerges in the story. From here, Luke draws out two things for our instruction. First, how,

Fervent Desire Needed Clarity

Pay attention to the detailed way Luke describes Apollos. Look at verses 24-25, “He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John.” Luke is almost gushing over Apollos, beginning with his superior rhetorical skills and handling of Scripture. The Greek word “competent” is where we get dynamite from, so it may mean mighty or powerful. Not only this, but he shares how Apollos had been instructed in the way of the Lord and was fervently and accurately teaching about things concerning Jesus. I think Luke wants us “ooing” and “awing” as we read this. Yet, note the final clause of verse 25, “though he knew only the baptism of John.” This interrupts the amazement to introduce the story’s problem. Though Apollos had been instructed in the way of Jesus and accurately taught some truth about Jesus, something was off. Continue in verse 26, “He began to speak 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.” This is the problem’s climax and resolution. In his fervency, Apollos boldly spoke about Jesus in the synagogue, but, when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they saw he needed gospel clarity. Consider the significance of this before we unpack it more. Apollos, with superior rhetorical skills and handling of Scripture, is corrected by tentmakers. Further, mentioning Priscilla first may indicate she led in this engagement, making this moment even more shocking from a cultural standpoint. Marvel at the bold care of Priscilla and Aquila. They saw a skilled man, with fervent desire for the Lord, teaching some things accurately but leaving out important gospel truths. So, they gently take him aside to strengthen his understanding, knowing it was dangerous to leave him without gospel clarity. Next, Luke draws out how,

Faithful Discipleship Bolstered Effectiveness

Consider what was explained to Apollos. Look at verse 26 again, “they...explained to him the way of God more accurately.” While we aren’t given details, there are clues in the narrative. First, note the language shift from verses 25 to 26. Apollos knew “the way of the Lord” and taught “things concerning Jesus.” They explained “the way of God more accurately.” Second, note how Apollos only knew John’s Baptism. A peak into Acts 19:4 expounds on this, where Paul says, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.” John’s baptism was for repentance that prepared for Jesus. These clues suggest Apollos was accurately teaching about Jesus’ life, ways, and maybe even that He was the Messiah, but was missing the depth of meaning in Jesus’ death and resurrection for God’s new covenant people. With baptism and the Spirit as the focus of Acts 19:1-10, we can surmise those are key truths missing in Apollos’ teaching. Priscilla and Aquila appear, then, to explain how John’s baptism was a foreshadow of Christ’s, and how Apollos’ teaching must include an understanding of baptism in light of Christ’s saving work along with the Spirit’s presence as the fulfillment of Israel’s Messianic hope. What does this mean for us? These are vital truths to understand in the gospel. Church, we must not only believe Jesus is the Messiah and only know the ways of His teaching. We have to know and trust in His atoning work on the cross and resurrection as how we become part of God’s new covenant people. And how the Spirit’s presence, evidenced in various ways, is the confirmation of our hope. We will dive deeply into this next week. At this point, focus on the faithful discipleship of Priscilla and Aquila of Apollos to ensure he fully understood the gospel. Now, scholars debate what this means for Apollos’ salvation because it is clear the 12 disciples in Acts 19 are not saved. I believe Apollos was redeemed because Luke hints at belief through his instruction in the way of Christ and likely indicates the Spirit’s presence with the phrase “fervent in spirit.” Luke’s isn’t suggesting Apollos is like the disciples in Acts 19 but laying a foundation for that story by showing the importance of clarity in gospel preaching.

Pay attention to Luke's shift to the results of their discipleship in verses 27-28, "And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, 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." The believers in Ephesus encourage Apollos on mission and show their approval of his ministry and message by sending a letter with him, indicating he received their instruction and adjusted his gospel message. Then, Luke emphasizes two ways Apollos was effective in ministry. He "greatly helped" believers, strengthening disciples as Paul did. And he "powerfully" witnessed to the gospel like Paul, "showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus." Note the adjectives, "greatly" and "powerfully." Priscilla and Aquila bolstered Apollos' effectiveness. He was graced with passion, skilled in rhetoric, handled Scripture well, and accurately spoke of Jesus' life and ways. But lacked full gospel clarity. After Priscilla and Aquila deepened his understanding, the Spirit infused those graces with truth, and his ministry became exponentially fruitful. Passion alone wasn't sufficient. Accuracy in understanding the ways of Jesus wasn't enough. He needed to mine and embrace the depths of the gospel to be effective for Christ's kingdom. And through their faithfulness, a mighty shepherd was given to the church. As we bring this story to a close, I see three take aways for us. First,

1) Ensure the Gospel is Clear

Luke's primary goal in this story and next week's story is to ensure we understand the full truth of the gospel. Many would be tempted, after seeing Apollos' skill, passion, grasp of the Scripture, and partially accurate teaching, to assume he was all set. But his teaching was missing important pieces. Like the opening illustration, a partial understanding of the gospel will lead to an incomplete trust in the gospel. We must ensure we are clear in our understanding of the gospel. Do you believe in the ways of Jesus communicated through His life and teaching? Are you trusting in His crucifixion and resurrection for your redemption? Do you believe in the promised Spirit and experience His power? If not, confess your sin, cry out for mercy, and trust in the promises of Christ's saving work. Ensure the gospel is clear to find true life today. Second,

2) Engage in Deep Discipleship

Consider the emphasis Luke places on deep discipleship in this passage. In verse 23, Paul goes back to churches he planted and already strengthened to "strengthen all the disciples" again. Then, in verse 26, Priscilla and Aquila disciple Apollos. Kent Hughes comments, "Apollos—a Jew, an Alexandrian, learned, mighty in the Scriptures, fervent in spirit, accurate in his teaching, bold in his preaching—could only take the people as far as he had come himself, and not one step further." (R. Kent Hughes, Acts—The Church Afire, p. 249). Don't settle for half-hearted discipleship. Ephesians 4:12-13 says, the work of ministry is to help us "all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." Engage in deep discipleship, seeking to go deeper in your faith. Finally,

3) Embrace Your Role in Ministry

The goal of us going deeper in faith is to take others with us. Ephesians 4:11-12 says, Christ "gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry." We see four different gospel ministry roles in this passage. Paul, as an apostle, brings Priscilla and Aquila on mission and proclaims the gospel in Ephesus. Apollos, as a fervent believer, speaks boldly in the synagogue, strengthens believers, and shows the Christ is Jesus. Priscilla and Aquila, as tentmakers, strengthen Apollos' understanding. And the whole church encouraged Apollos on mission. Here is where it gets even better. When Paul writes to the Corinthian believers in 1 Corinthians 16:19, he says, "The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord." Aquila and Priscilla resided in Ephesus, hosting the church there. That is another role in ministry.

Family, we've been talking about this in our Spiritual Gifts class. There are many roles in ministry and all are vital. The question is never; will I minister to others? But how will I minister to others? As you go deep in discipleship, embrace your role in ministry and seek to take others with you.

Conclusion:

As the worship team is coming to lead us in a time of reflection and response, take time to examine your heart and ask what God is calling you to believe, desire, or do in response to this story. Do you need to believe in the full truths of the gospel? Let's the truths of the way of Jesus, work of Jesus, and promise of Jesus sink deep into your heart today. Do you need to desire or commit to going deeper in discipleship? Let Paul's work, Apollos' need, Priscilla and Aquila's discipleship, and the fruit of their discipleship move you to go deeper in your own faith. Do you need to believe God has a role for you in ministry to others? Desire to be used by Him? Or seek others to minister to? Ask for the Spirit to give you clarity and direct your steps towards others. Family, have this story propel you forward in your life with Christ. Would you pray with me as we prepare to respond?