

## INCOMPLETE PICTURE

Acts 18:24-19:07

Many people are convinced that getting a good education is essential for our young people. We support public schools with our tax dollars and we are concerned when we hear statistics of high dropout rates. Deep down inside we realize that knowledge is the key that opens many doors. What many of us fail to realize is that much of our learning is acquired outside of the formal classroom. The tendency for a lot of kids as they are going through the graduation experience is to think that they have somehow completed the learning process. The fact of the matter should be that they have started a good foundation upon which they can continue to learn.

Much of what we learn comes from what others share with us out of their experiences and what they have been taught. We also learn from our own experiences. As we assemble what we learn from others and from our own experiences it is extremely important that we build our lives upon a proper foundation. In other words, there may be many interpretations of the facts and the interpretations may be, and many times are, more important than the facts themselves. The foundation and the design of a house can be more important than the materials that go into. You can take the finest building materials available and construct a shack or you might build a mansion from laminated Popsicle sticks.

One of the features of the early church was the open sharing among the members as they gathered for worship. Much of their learning of how to implement the practical aspects of Christian living came from these shared experiences. Today's Christians need to share more with each other from life's experiences as well as insights that we have as we study the Scripture. A couple of examples of how the early Christians learned from each other are found in Acts 18 and 19. One of these and perhaps the second example may be related to the ministry of a man named Apollos.

### A Partial Witness – 18:24-26

<sup>24</sup> Now a Jew named Apollos, an Alexandrian by birth, an eloquent man, came to Ephesus; and he was mighty in the Scriptures. <sup>25</sup> 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; <sup>26</sup> 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. Acts 18:24–26 (NASB95)

Alexandria was the second largest city in the Roman Empire. It had a population of around 600,000 and 25% of those were Jews. There were more Jews in Alexandria than in Jerusalem except during times of feasts (such as Passover and Tabernacles) when many pilgrims made their way to Jerusalem. It had the largest library in the known world with more than 700,000 books or scrolls. It was a center of learning and great philosophers.

It would have been natural for a number of the Jews who called Alexandria their home to have visited Jerusalem and would have learned of John the Baptist and perhaps heard of Jesus. Some have speculated that some of John's disciples had moved to Alexandria and shared the message that John was proclaiming. Apollos had been influenced by these and recognized the truth in John's message since he was well acquainted with the Old Testament scriptures. The time when Apollos came to Ephesus was more than two decades after the beginning of the Church. Some Christians may have emigrated to Alexandria which could have been a factor in what Apollos knew about "the way of the Lord." It is likely that Apollos studied the Septuagint which was the Greek translation of the Hebrew texts. Much of the work of this translation

(which was completed in 132 B.C.) had been done by scholars in Alexandria.

Apollos was a gifted communicator. He was also a man full of enthusiasm and knowledge of the Old Testament. He had heard about Jesus and knew about the baptism that John the Baptist preached. However, there was a lack of knowledge regarding several crucial aspects of the Gospel. Based on what he knew of the Old Testament and what he knew of the life and work of Jesus, he was convinced that Jesus was the Messiah and he was getting the word out to others.

The statement that Apollos was acquainted with the “baptism” of John means more than just the fact he knew that John was baptizing people as a testimony of repentance, but would include the doctrine and teaching of John regarding the coming of the Messiah and the salvation that God would reveal to humanity through the life and work of Christ. Because of this promised salvation, the natural response for those whose sins had been forgiven would be to turn their lives around and live for God.

No one seems to know the details of what “the way of the Lord” included with regard to what Apollos was teaching. We might assume that it certainly included the morality teachings of Jesus. Did it include the virgin birth and all the implication of that truth? Did it include the miracles that Jesus did? Was Apollos aware of the “new covenant” and the crucifixion and resurrection and ascension and the great commission? Had he heard about the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost?

We might ask these same questions of many people today who identify themselves as Christians. Many have some acquaintance of the “moral teachings” of Jesus and have heard that He was born of a virgin but do not have any idea of the importance of that truth. One major difference is that so many people today do not have the advantage of Apollos in that they are not very familiar with the Scriptures. Neither are they enthusiastic about what they do know.

When Apollos came to Ephesus he continued to preach and teach the Good News that he knew. Some commentators believe that Apollos was associated in some way with the “disciples” that Paul encountered when he returned to Ephesus after Apollos had left the area. If there was a connection, then he had apparently been there for some time and been successful in that people had believed and were following the way as they had been taught by him. (Other commentators believe there was not any connection but that Luke was simply giving another example of people not having the “full story” of all that had occurred in the early days of the Church.)

There was a couple in Ephesus at that time, Aquila and Priscilla, who happened to hear Apollos teach in the synagogue there. They realized that he had not heard the “rest of the story.” They handled the matter carefully and with sensitivity to the feelings of Apollos. They did not challenge him publicly as many people are likely to do today when they hear someone that may not know the complete gospel message.

Luke did not address whether or not Apollos had been baptized with “John’s baptism” or “Christian baptism.” Luke does not make any mention of Apollos being baptized by Aquila after he heard and believed the “more accurate” account of the Gospel.

#### A Complete Witness – 18:27-28

<sup>27</sup> 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, <sup>28</sup> for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, demonstrating by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ. Acts 18:27–28 (NASB95)

Even though Apollos was very knowledgeable of the Old Testament he was still able and willing to learn from others. This made him even more effective in his preaching. He continued

in his traveling ministry and did so with the endorsement of the church at Ephesus. He went on to Corinth and was able to convincingly show from the Scriptures that Jesus was truly God's promised Messiah. Since Aquila and Priscilla had recently lived in Corinth and had traveled with Paul from there to Ephesus, they were likely instrumental in the decision that Apollos made to go to Corinth.

The letter of endorsement that the church at Ephesus sent was likely the genesis of the practice that we have in some churches today when Christians move from one local church body to another. When someone comes to a church and wants to be recognized as being part of that body of believers and become involved in the ongoing ministry of that church, then those in that church should be concerned about how this person would fit into the local body. A letter of recommendation from the former church has the purpose of providing assurance that the person or family will be helpful to the receiving church.

Apollos was indeed helpful to the believers in the church at Corinth where he ministered. The wording (through grace) in verse 27 should be interpreted to mean that the help he provided to the believers was through the gifts of grace that the Holy Spirit had provided to him for that ministry.

Apollos' excellent familiarity with the Old Testament was helpful to him as the church at Corinth encountered opposition from the Jews who denied that the Messiah had come. This denial is still the official position of many Jews today and is a barrier to evangelism of the lost in modern-day Israel and among Jews in other parts of the world.

#### An Incomplete Faith – 19:1-7

<sup>1</sup> It happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the upper country and came to Ephesus, and found some disciples. <sup>2</sup> 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." <sup>3</sup> And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" And they said, "Into John's baptism." <sup>4</sup> 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." <sup>5</sup> When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. <sup>6</sup> And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking with tongues and prophesying. <sup>7</sup> There were in all about twelve men. Acts 19:1-7 (NASB95)

The events described in our study are part of what we typically refer to as the Third Missionary Journey of Paul. Paul had return from Corinth by way of Ephesus and Caesarea from which he then made his way to Jerusalem and eventually returned to Antioch. The Third Missionary trip had Paul (on his way to Ephesus) revisiting many of the areas he had been to on the previous trips.

When Paul got back to Ephesus, Apollos had already left to go to Corinth. It is uncertain whether the "disciples" Paul found in the area were associated with Apollos. Since both Apollos and this group knew "only the baptism of John" it is tempting to think that Apollos may have known them prior to meeting Aquila and Priscilla.

These folks were disciples of Jesus and believed that he was God's Messiah. However, evidently, there was something missing that prompted Paul to ask the question, "Have you received the Holy Spirit since you believed?"

The answer attributed to them that they "had not even heard of the Holy Spirit" seems somewhat inconsistent with the statement that they were familiar with the doctrine or teaching of John the Baptist. John's message regarding the Messiah included information about the Holy Spirit. Some commentators try to get around what seems to be an inconsistency in stating that what they "really meant" was that they did not know that the Holy Spirit had been "given."

There is a much more straightforward explanation that eliminates the inconsistency that is

related to what they actually said being “lost in translation” from the Greek to English. The Greek word “oude” was translated into English as “not so much as” (in verse two) comes from a combination of two Greek words “ou” which is normally translated as “not” and “de” which is normally translated as “but.” Putting these normal translations together, the phrase “We have not so much as heard” would become “We have not but heard.” In today’s way of expressing this thought we would say “We have ONLY heard.” This interpretation would be totally consistent with what one would expect from a disciple of John the Baptist.

They had only heard of the Holy Spirit but had not experienced Him. Many Christians today have only heard about the Holy Spirit. They might remember seeing the name or singing a hymn that has the name in it or they might even recall that the name was used in the “baptismal formula” – in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. However, knowledge of the Holy Spirit in their lives is about as strange to them as it was to these disciples at Ephesus.

These twelve disciples knew about the baptism of John which was symbolic of repentance. However, John the Baptist had pointed people to Jesus and had declared that Jesus would baptize them with (in) the Holy Spirit. If the “baptism of John” was *the public testimony that a person accepted and believed the message or doctrine that John proclaimed*, then these disciples would have believed and have put their trust in the Messiah to come as the one Who would provide a way for the remission of sins.

We read, in Luke’s gospel account (Luke 3:3), that John the Baptist came “preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.” Do we take this to mean that “repentance leads to the remission of sins” or that “the remission of sins leads to repentance?” This is a fundamental question of which comes first – action or faith? There are a lot of teaching materials that tell that the first step on the road to salvation is repentance. I have taught that on many occasions that John came preaching “repentance” and Jesus came preaching “believe.” The conclusion was that we are to “repent and believe.” If we examine closely the message from John the Baptist we see clearly that he taught that the Lord was coming to bring salvation (forgiveness of sins) as prophesied by Isaiah. The quote in Luke 3:6 “all flesh shall see the salvation of God” is thought by some to mean that all flesh would see the Messiah. We could take this a step further and note that the name of Jesus (Joshua) in Hebrew literally means God’s salvation. These references point to the importance of faith that leads to repentance.

The part that these disciples had not heard about was that Jesus had told His disciples that they should wait in Jerusalem until they received the Holy Spirit and they did just that when the Spirit was poured out upon them on the Day of Pentecost. In subsequent accounts, the coming of the Holy Spirit upon believers was recorded. We see it with regard to the believers in Samaria (Peter and John laid hands on them and the Holy Spirit came upon them) and in Caesarea at the home of Cornelius.

Look closely at verses four and five. In most translations you will find quotation marks around what Paul said in verse four and no quotation marks in verse five. The original text does not have any quotation marks. Consequently, it is possible that verse five is part of what Paul stated to these disciples rather than just being part of the narrative. In other words, those people referenced as “they” in verse five would be those who were baptized with John’s baptism and would not mean that Paul re-baptized these twelve disciples. John Gill’s Expositor Commentary (mid 18<sup>th</sup> century) makes this very argument. His argument is that the arrangement of verses four, five and six has the statement that “Paul said” at the beginning of verse four and then the next action attributed to Paul is in verse six where we see that “Paul laid his hands on them.” Gill also made the point that verse five does not state that “they” were re-baptized into the name

of the Lord Jesus but had already been baptized in the name of the Messiah since John did not baptize in his own name.

After Paul had fully explained the Gospel to these men, they were ready to receive all that God had for them. Paul laid his hands upon them and they received the Spirit's power in their lives. How did they know that the Spirit had come upon them? They spoke with tongues and prophesied. Some see this as verification that God was at work in their lives so that they were now equipped for ministry.

This account leaves a number of questions that scholars have debated for many years. Were these twelve disciples saved? That is, were they born again of the Spirit of God? Did they put their trust in the Messiah for the remission of their sins as John had taught? Is it possible that a person can be born again of God's spirit and not have "received" the Holy Spirit in the sense that Paul asked the question of these disciples? Is it reasonable to "have the Holy Spirit within" and then "have the Holy Spirit come upon" a person for ministry?

Is it any different today? Can we really expect people to "receive" the Holy Spirit when they believe if they are not given the complete gospel message any more than those disciples in Ephesus did? If verification of God working in the life of people was needed in their time, why would it not also be needed now?

We can learn from each other and many times those who are the most educated and eloquent can learn from those who have simply walked with the Lord. If we want others to learn from us, then we must be sensitive to them and show respect for them as we share about Christ in our lives. Many people that we encounter do not realize the need to surrender themselves to God through Jesus Christ. They don't realize the necessity to publicly confess Him before others. They don't realize that believers should be baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit. They won't know unless someone tells them. You may be the one that God wants to use to share this essential information with another person.