

Apollos -- the Pulpit Taught by the Pew

by Daniel Steele

Apollos, a preacher in the early Christian church, lacked a correct understanding of gospel salvation and the Holy Spirit, but was guided and corrected by laypeople, illustrating the importance of spiritual growth and experience.

Scripture: Psalm 51:11, Luke 3:16, Acts 18:24, Acts 19:2, 1 Thessalonians 5:19

Topics: "Holy Spirit", "Christian Baptism"

Description

Daniel Steele delves into the character of Apollos in the Acts of the Apostles, challenging common misconceptions about his knowledge of the Gospel of Christ and the baptism of John. Steele highlights Apollos' background in Alexandria, his Scriptural knowledge, and his fervency in the Spirit, shedding light on his journey towards a deeper understanding of Christian baptism and the Holy Spirit. Through a detailed examination of Apollos' teachings and interactions with Aquila and Priscilla, Steele emphasizes the importance of experiencing the fullness of the Spirit for both preachers and laypeople in modern times.

Transcript

APOLLOS flashes like a splendid meteor through the Acts of the Apostles, and is gone. So brief is the view that we are liable to be mistaken respecting this character. We believe that the common conception of him is that he knew nothing of the Gospel of Christ, its supernatural origin, the miracles, teachings, character, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, but that in the apostolic age he was flaming with zeal for John's baptism, a dispensation which had long since been brought to an end by the stroke of the headsman's axe in the Castle of Machaerus. He is viewed as the Rip van Winkle of the apostolic Church, who woke up from his long sleep, and stood up at noonday and bade the people watch for the coming sunrise. This popular notion of Apollos suggests the story of the mythical old man in the backwoods of America, who after the American Revolution had not heard of that event, and was still praying for King George the Third.

It is the purpose of this paper to clear away these misconceptions, and to contribute somewhat to a better understanding of this distinguished preacher at the time when he suddenly bursts into Church history. Let us, then, critically examine the first brief mention made of him in Acts xviii. 24-28. His being "born at Alexandria," the great seat of learning and philosophy, at a short distance from Palestine, is a circumstance favorable to a knowledge of the facts of Christ's life. For the people of that city were so much interested in the religion of their Jewish neighbors that they had translated the Old Testament into the

Greek language. Also many Alexandrians were Jews in constant intercourse with the fatherland. From the fact that he was "mighty in the Scriptures" we infer that he had a theme which afforded a scope for the display of his Scriptural knowledge. The baptism of John is altogether too narrow for any such exhibition, but a knowledge of the facts of the life of Jesus would enable him to show that Moses in the Law speaks of Him, and that "to Him give all the prophets witness."

The phrase, "well instructed," may be better rendered by transferring the Greek word, "catechized," which literally signifies to sound a thing into one's ears by the living teacher. "In the way of the Lord" is an abbreviation for "the way of the Lord Jesus Christ." This is the most common signification of "the Lord" in the New Testament. This phrase, "fervent in the spirit," has been sadly darkened by the failure to write Spirit with a capital. Says Bengel: "He had the Spirit, not in that special way which is treated of in Acts xix. 6: 'And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them, and they spake with tongues and prophesied.' but in the ordinary way." He was therefore "boiling with the Spirit," the author of all real piety, in all dispensations, whether of Gentilism, Patriarchism, or Judaism. Hence, having the Holy Ghost, not in his official character as the Paraclete, but in his essential presence and inworking. Apollos was in a state of grace and was justified before God. "And taught diligently." By referring to the 26th verse, the original of the adverb "diligently" will be found in the comparative degree. properly rendered "perfectly." See also the same word, rendered "perfectly" in Acts xxiii. 15, 20, and I Thess. v. 2, and "perfect" in Luke i. 3, and Acts xxiv. 22.

We now come to a passage which somebody has tinkered. The Greek of the best manuscripts, as is shown by Alford, is not "the things of the Lord," as in King James' version, but "the things of Jesus" or "concerning Jesus" (R.V.) The motive for this tampering with the text is very obvious. Some one, thinking that the correct words, "things of Jesus," did not square very well with "knowing only the baptism of John," has endeavored to produce a harmony by altering "Jesus" to the indefinite "Lord," which may be interpreted as signifying, "God the Father." Alford restores "Jesus" to the text. Thus we have the true reading. "and taught perfectly the things of Jesus, knowing only the baptism of John."

How to harmonize these clauses is the problem of the commentators. Says Alford, "He knew and taught accurately the facts respecting Jesus, but of the consequences of that which he taught, all of which may be summed up in the doctrine of Christian baptism, he had no idea." Bengel thinks that "he had not heard concerning the death and resurrection of Christ, and concerning the Paraclete." Still nearer does Olshausen come to the truth. "He had learned nothing regarding the glorification and exaltation of Christ in His resurrection and ascension, nor regarding the gift of the Holy Ghost as the consequence of His elevation." But in our opinion Meyer lets the light most fully into this difficult question, when he says that "it is not meant that he was absolutely ignorant of the fact of there being such a thing as Christian baptism, but ignorant of its being anything different from that of John; he knew, or recognized in baptism only that which the baptism of John was -- a sign of repentance. "

The sentence italicized is the key to the whole difficulty. He was acquainted with all the facts of Christ's earthly life, Christian baptism included, but had failed to see that, while John's baptism symbolized the negative part of sanctification, the putting away of sin, or death unto sin, Christian baptism prefigures the positive part, the fullness of the Divine life through the baptism of the Holy Ghost. Thus identifying the symbolical import of the two baptisms through imperfect instruction, he may have been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, and have experienced no spiritual change, no incoming of the Comforter, through his lack of faith. For there is no account of his subsequent baptism, though his hearers in Ephesus, who were in the same condition, were baptized under the direction of Paul.

The great defect in Apollos, therefore, was in not having a correct view of the extent of gospel salvation, through the baptism and indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the office of the Comforter and Sanctifier, and in the absence of the experience of this Spirit-baptism. He was in just the spiritual state in which many eloquent preachers are found in modern times. In a sense they are spiritual men, and some of them are "fervent in the Spirit," in his ordinary operation, but they have no experience of that instantaneous and mighty anointing of soul, that distinct and specific personal pentecost, the crowning work of Jesus as foreseen by John, "He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire."

Fletcher says that the ordinary work of the Spirit is a gentle distilling like the dew; the extraordinary is the outpouring of a mighty shower. Apollos had been moistened by the dew, but not drenched by the shower. Two of his hearers who were enjoying the shower in their own hearts quickly detected the dryness of the preaching of their Alexandrian pastor, suspected the cause, and attempted the cure. Their mode of procedure is a model for all those laymen whose experience has gone beyond that of their preacher. Instead of hinting his defective experience in their exhortations and prayers, they, with a delicate regard for the feelings of their religious teacher, took him aside, and privately supplied what was lacking in his doctrine, and opened up to his willing feet that "large place" into which the glorified Head of the Church invited him to come and abide. We believe that this is what Aquila and Priscilla did when "they took Apollos unto them," and expounded unto Him the way of God more perfectly. Their instruction was not in vain. Soon we find Apollos in Achaia, where he "helped them much which had believed through grace." Having been for a long time destitute of the fullness of the Spirit, and having, through the help of others, found full salvation, probably after leaving Ephesus, he is now powerfully drawn in sympathy toward imperfect believers on whom only the dewdrops distill, and he leads them out where the cloud full of rain is pouring down its ceaseless shower. The vocation of Apollos henceforth is not to "plant," but to "water" the believing souls whom Paul gathers into Churches. Aquila and Priscilla had put the full watering pot into his hand. With his deeper experience his ministry had assumed a deeper significance and a higher joy. Then could he sing with Charles Wesley:--

"In a rapture of joy

My life I employ

The God of my life to proclaim;

'Tis worth living for this,

To administer bliss

And salvation in Jesus name."

Our conclusions respecting Apollos are strongly confirmed by an examination of his hearers in Ephesus before his spiritual enlargement, for he left immediately after the private interview with Aquila and his wife. Paul was the next preacher in Ephesus. He found twelve Christians. That they were genuine Christians is shown first by the fact that they are styled disciples. This term standing alone is always used in the Acts and in the Epistles as a synonym for Christians. Look in your concordances, and see. Secondly. the word "believe," which is predicated of them in Acts xix. 2: "Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed?" is only used of saving faith in Jesus Christ. Look in your concordances again, and see how numerous the passages like these. "He that believeth shall be saved," "Unto us who believe He is precious." You will then be prepared to justify the assertion of Alford, that "to believe," when no object is added, "can bear no

meaning but that of believing on the Lord Jesus." The text may be read, "since ye believed." Bengel sustains this. It may be read, "when ye believed;" this would imply the possibility of saving faith before receiving the Holy Spirit. Bengel's reading would argue that this is generally the case.

But how could they be Christians, in utter ignorance of the Holy Ghost? If they were instructed only in John's baptism they must have heard of the Holy Spirit, for John pointing his disciples to Christ, said: "He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire." If they were believers in Moses, they must have heard of the Spirit of God. If they had read the Hebrew Psalms, they would have found this expression, "Take not Thy Holy Spirit from me." Therefore we conclude with Bengel, that a strict construction must not be put upon the words, "We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost," but rather this, "Not even have we heard this, that there are others who receive Him." Therefore what they were ignorant of was the effusion of the Holy Spirit peculiar to the New Testament. Thus we find the old adage true, "Like priest, like people." They were in exactly the same state of experience with their former pastor, Apollos. They were in the ante-pentecostal state years after the Pentecost, as many Christians are today, centuries after the effusion of the Spirit. It is for the purpose of demonstrating the possibility of a fact so anomalous that we have conducted our readers through this exegesis. We believe that all candid readers, especially all Greek scholars, will vindicate us from the charge of "handling the word of God deceitfully."

If our inference from this passage is correct, then it follows that when penitents are justified through faith in Jesus Christ, they do not in the Pauline sense receive the Holy Ghost," in the peculiar office of the Paraclete, though they may receive the witness of the Spirit. It follows, moreover, that it is the duty of all who have been filled with the Spirit, whether preachers or laity, to testify of this great salvation, and to use all appropriate efforts to lead others, especially preachers of the word, into the enjoyment of this grace.

So far as our observation goes, we believe that in many of our modern Churches the laity are, in respect to this experience, like Aquila and Priscilla, often in advance of their cultured and eloquent ministers.

Says Bengel: "He who knows Jesus Christ can teach those powerful in the Scripture; and the latter are readily taught by the former."

"Shall we the Spirit's course restrain

Or quench the heavenly fire?

Let God his messengers ordain,

And whom he will inspire

Blow as he list, the Spirit's choice

Of instruments we bless;

We will, if Christ be preached, rejoice,

And wish the word success."

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