

**The Example of Priscilla, Aquila, and Paul:  
How to Relate to People who are Different from us Spiritually  
Acts 18:24 – 19:10**

Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church  
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The Bible is always relevant and practical. Chapters 18 and 19 of Acts are a valuable witness to modern world. These chapters tell the story of the spiritual renewal of the Christian leader, Apollos, and the beginning of St. Paul's third missionary journey. In chapter 18 we see the early church husband and wife team, Priscilla and Aquila, interact with Apollos, a gifted and talented man who means well, but whose faith, at this point, is incomplete. And then, in chapter 19, we see the apostle Paul model the same spiritual gentleness as he interacts with a dozen men who are spiritually searching, but are yet, unenlightened regarding Jesus Christ.

We live in a world rapidly abandoning the historical Christian consensus that once undergirded our nation. People today are raised in the secular wasteland of government sponsored education, knowing little or nothing of the biblical witness, the history and work of the church, or any religious tradition other than the empty goal to be "spiritual, but not religious." Spiritually, religiously, our world is not that different from that of the first century. The examples of Priscilla, Aquila, and Paul provide us with insight as we interact with our children, grandchildren, neighbors and friends. It offers guidance as to how to speak to the spiritual emptiness of the secular world around us.

As we begin, let me note that we in the modern world live in a spiritually empty world.

**We live in a spiritually empty world**

I have a Jewish friend who, at the time we met, was – like most couples today – living with his girlfriend. At the time, we became friends, he told me that he never intended to marry. He did not see any value or purpose in marriage. He had everything he wished in simply cohabiting. Time goes by, and my friend and his girlfriend decide that they will get married. They approached me to officiate and, after completing the premarital counseling together, I did officiate at their marriage. It was a wonderful day; a favorite among the wedding ceremonies I have performed. Months go by, maybe a year, and my friend in a conversation with me, on his own initiative, declares, "*Marriage is great. I had no idea that it would mean so much to me and be so fulfilling.*"

What was my friend telling me? He was confessing that there are spiritual and relational dimensions to marriage, spiritual and relational realities that do not exist when you merely live together, that he had discovered after he had made the commitment of marriage to his wife.

When I was younger, it was common for young people to dismiss marriage saying, "It is just a piece of paper." No. It is much more than a piece of paper. Part of

the ceremony of my Jewish friend's wedding included signing the Ketubah – the official Jewish wedding contract. It is a large decorative document, spelling out the marriage contract between the couple. They sign it together. It is framed and hangs on the wall of their home. The marriage involves the social rituals that bring the two families together to meet one another and offer their blessing to the couple. In a marriage, in contrast to merely moving in together, the couple announces their relationship publicly and offer their promises to one another; before family, friends, their extended community, and usually, the church. Think of all that goes into a wedding: the groom's approach to the bride's father; proposal; the acceptance; the setting of a date, location and ceremony; deciding the reception venue; the invitation list; choosing the dress; choosing the bridal party dresses; determining the wedding party; the rehearsal; the rehearsal dinner; the vows; special music; the special dances; the honeymoon; setting up a joint household after the wedding; setting up joint bank accounts...I could go on. Implicit in all these activities, the couple is seeking the blessing, support and encouragement of their family and circle of acquaintance.

When I declare that we live in a spiritual empty world, what I mean is that we live in a world that blinds people to the spiritual dimensions of life. Our education, culture, politics and media do not teach; indeed, they deliberately obscure the spiritual values of life. For example, in the case of marriage, being a husband or wife is a much higher social status than that of being a roommate. But many in our world today are blind to this spiritual reality. They simple do not see it.

Let me offer two more, quick, examples of the spiritual emptiness of the modern world. Catholic medical schools understand that the spiritual dimensions of life must be included in the task of teaching and training doctors. I read recently of a medical student who, having begun his education in the spiritual wasteland of government schooling, struggled in his Catholic medical assignment to assess a patient's *spiritual* history. The student realized that he himself had no inner spiritual life. How could he assess what he had never experienced or understood? Thankfully, the Catholic medical school he attended understood, and taught, that medicine is more, much more, than science, technique, and technology. It is giving him the spiritual tools his secular education omitted.

Another, much more controversial example, is the acceptance and promotion of transgenderism as a social reality. When a baby is born, we declare, "It is a boy." or "It is a girl." The child has an obvious sexual identity. As Genesis 1:27 puts it, male and female he created them. Contrast that to the transgender premise: that if my inner self understanding does not agree with my outward sexual reality. I must make my outward reality conform to my inner understanding. In this, we replace "*an authentic, material sexuality with a fantasy of the mind. A real something is replaced with nothing.*" (Jermann, February 2017) The modern world so exalts the self that it is no longer willing to live within the realty of the created order God has established.

How do we live and respond to the crazy world in which we find ourselves today? Let's look at the passage before us for insight. We note first, some folk are naturally gifted communicators, but they are limited in their spiritual understanding.

### **Some folk are naturally gifted communicators but are limited in their spiritual understanding**

<sup>24</sup> Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. <sup>25</sup> 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.

The world is full of men and women like Apollos. They are gifted and talented in many arenas of life, but they lack a key spiritual component in understanding. Just before Christmas, the New York Times columnist, Nicolas Kristof, interviewed Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City. Speaking of his own spiritual understanding, Kristof told Keller, "*I deeply admire Jesus and his message,*" he said, "*but am also skeptical of themes that have been integral to Christianity—the virgin birth, the Resurrection, the miracles, and so on.*" He asked if these ideas were essential to the Christian faith? Isn't it possible to be a Christian without embracing them? Keller rightly explained to Kristoff, "that the main point of Jesus' teaching, and of the New Testament, is not a moral maxim, but a message: that Jesus Christ is God in human form. Who *was* and [that he] *did* everything the ancient creeds say. And believing this is essential." (Stonestreet, 2017)

Interacting with people from different spiritual perspectives is part of life. I do not know if Kristof was convinced, but Keller witnessed to the truth of Jesus faithfully. Like Kristoff, Apollos' understanding of Jesus was severely limited. It appears that Apollos knew of Jesus' preaching and teaching ministry. Like Kristoff, at this point Apollos believed that Jesus was a great teacher. He admired and revered Jesus. He sought to follow Jesus' teaching. Apollos had accurate, but incomplete knowledge of Jesus. He knew of the baptism of John the Baptist, but had not yet been told of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. He knew the importance of repentance. But had not yet learned of the full significance of Jesus' passion, resurrection and ascension.

How are we to relate to those whose understanding is incomplete? First, we offer quiet, clear instruction to set things right.

### **What they need is 1) quiet instruction**

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

Priscilla and Aquila take Apollos aside. They offer no judgment, no attitude, no mockery. He is a sincere man in search of understanding. They offer him further teaching and knowledge. They meet him where he is. They fill in the blanks. They explain what is needed. When we find a person who is open to instruction in the faith, it is of great value to take the time to explain things.

Every couple of years we offer a Confirmation Class at Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church. This is a key element of how we seek to pass on the faith to the next generation of believers. The goal is to gain a basic understanding of the faith.

Note that no time period is mentioned. The instruction of Apollos would not have involved merely an afternoon coffee at Starbucks. Instruction takes time, commitment and effort. We should understand that Priscilla and Aquila's instruction took months. For now, we note the value quiet instruction and of encouraging those who are gifted to use their gifts to God's glory.

### **And 2) encouragement to use their gifts to God's glory**

<sup>27</sup> 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, <sup>28</sup> for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.

Apollos' training is completed. He desires to go to a new town in order to spread the word about Jesus. He determines to leave Ephesus and travel to Achaia to teach there. The church leaders in Ephesus send letters of introduction to encourage the leaders at Achaia to make good use of Apollos' talent and teaching skill.

In Achaia, Apollos' reputation grows further: he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus. There is a place for public debate of the Christian faith. We should be thankful for Christian men and women who are accomplished at defending the faith publicly. In our world, this would include people such as Tim Keller, Ravi Zacharias, Ken Hamm, Carmine LaBerge, Larry Taunton, Jerry Fallwell, Jr., and others. Then, as now, the goal and task of public debate is to declare the truth about Jesus, showing that the Christ was Jesus. Knowing Jesus' teaching is important. But, knowing who the person of Jesus is, is essential. There is an important place in Christian witness for apologetics, opposing those who oppose Christ and his church. The debate not only about Jesus' teaching, but it is equally about his life and purpose. Apollos showed that the Christ was Jesus.

At this point, Luke shifts gears in the story he is telling. He moves from telling us of Apollos back to telling us of Paul. As we will see, there are similarities between the evangelistic ministries of Apollos and Paul. One thing we learn as we follow Luke's story is that God is at work in various places.

### **Always remember, God is at work in various places**

And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus.

There is an old joke about St. Peter showing some new comers around heaven when the group comes upon a small enclosed area and St. Peter instructs the folk with him to be very quiet as they pass by. A little while later, someone asks St. Peter why

they had to be silent as they passed that one section. St. Peter replied, *“Oh, they are the Presbyterians and they think that they are the only ones up here.”*

Apollos is working in one place. Paul in another. God is at work in both. The point is that God has been and continues to be at work in various, sometimes surprising, places in our world. The church of Jesus Christ continues to grow. God is at work in the refugee camps in Europe; in Egypt; in Saudi Arabia; Turkey; China; in the barrios of Brazil; and the ghettos of South Africa.

Next, Paul provides an example of the power of asking discerning spiritual questions.

### **Paul asked discerning spiritual questions**

There he found some disciples. <sup>2</sup> And he said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they said, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.”

The Christian philosopher, Francis Schaeffer, once said that if he knew that he would have only an hour to spend with someone, he would use the first fifty minutes asking questions, getting to know them. In the last ten minutes, he would seek to offer the message of Christ to them in a way that would be meaningful to their circumstances. In these verses the Apostle Paul is on his way to Ephesus and he meets a dozen men whom he assumes, at first, are Christian believers like himself. However, as he gets to know them, he finds that their spiritual understanding seems incomplete. They are men of faith, but not as yet of full, complete understanding. Like Apollos, prior to meeting up with Priscilla and Aquila, they are people of the Old Covenant, not the new.

Verse 2 sounds a little funny to our ears. <sup>2</sup> And he said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they said, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” The Spirit of God is referred to many times in the Hebrew scriptures. These are people of faith, obviously, so how can it be that they have not even heard of the Holy Spirit? I think the most likely explanation is that Paul is asking them if they are aware of the fulfillment of Joel’s prophesy, the pouring out of God’s Spirit, at Pentecost. The baptism of the Spirit at Pentecost was not known to them. They believed, but still belonged to the Old Covenant. It appeared that their understanding needed to be deepened and completed.

Sensing this to be the case, Paul does what any wise conversation partner might do, he follows up by asking clarifying questions.

### **He followed up with clarifying questions**

<sup>3</sup> And he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They said, “Into John’s baptism.”

Last Sunday was Baptism of the Lord Sunday. We looked together at Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist. We noted that John the Baptist, important as he is, was a man of the Old Covenant. He is the transition figure between the Old and New Testaments. On one hand, John’s is the voice crying in the wilderness to make straight

the highways of our God. And on the other hand, John's message is a call to confession of sin and of repentance, of being baptized for the forgiveness of sin. John's message to his hearers is to be ready, spiritually, for the one who would come after him.

So, when Paul hears the response to his question, that they had been baptized "Into John's baptism," he knew that their understanding was incomplete. They had not heard of Pentecost. They had not learned that Jesus of Nazareth is the one to whom John the Baptist pointed. They were sincere. They were inquirers. They were on the pathway of faith. But they had not yet arrived at saving faith.

What does Paul do? What would you expect him to do? He takes the time to explain things clearly.

### **He then explained things clearly**

<sup>4</sup> And Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus."

There is a sense that when a person comes to saving faith, they come home to what they already knew, but could not fully explain or articulate. I read the story, years ago, of the defection of a Russian KGB officer during the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States. This man was a good communist. He had been raised with no faith. But questions and doubts began to arise. Though he had had no prior contact with a church, he felt himself drawn and called. He went through elaborate counter-surveillance efforts to be sure he was not being followed as he would sneak inside a Russian Orthodox Church. He knew no one. He did not know what to do in a church. He had not been taught to pray. He just stood and looked. During his debriefing in the United States, after his defection, his handlers arranged for him to meet with a Russian Orthodox Priest. The priest completed the circle for him, greeted him warmly, smiled, and said to him: "Let me introduce you to the God you do-not-as-yet know."

Paul starts with where these twelve men are spiritually. He tells them of Jesus, the one to whom John the Baptist pointed. Jesus is the one in whom they should place their faith. And they did place their faith in Jesus Christ. They heard the message, believed, confessed faith in Christ and were baptized.

Paul's response to their response of faith is to offer it all up to God in prayer.

### **Paul: offer it to God in prayer**

<sup>5</sup> On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. <sup>6</sup> And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. <sup>7</sup> There were about twelve men in all.

The Holy Spirit falls on these twelve men. They are now clearly part of the New Covenant. They are followers of Christ, members of his church. John's baptism was a *work* of the Old Covenant law. Christ's baptism is the *word* of faith. They needed the full

story, right information. Now they had been given it and were fully part of Christ's community. They believed, confessed and were baptized.

Some modern contemporary Jews, who have come to place their faith in Jesus Christ, may refer to themselves as "completed Jews." What they mean is to say that they are blessed to 1) among God's Chosen People and 3) that they are blessed to among those who know and believe in Jesus the Messiah. They see the full picture. They are children of both the Old and the New Covenants. We can see that idea of completion in this verse. For these twelve, their walk of faith began with John the Baptist, and now it continues in being baptized into Christ.

Then, in conclusion, Paul prays for them. When everything is done, commit it to God in prayer. Prayer is so essential to the Christian walk and life. Prayer is our way of connecting what we believe, our faith, and what we have done, baptism in the name of Christ, into the spiritual realm of God the Father.

Before we move off this point, I want to highlight the importance of prayer in our efforts to stand firm against the juggernaut of the modern, secular, materialist world around us. In this passage, Paul lays his hands on these men, he prays for them, and the Holy Spirit comes in power in their midst. Prayer unleashed God' power in their midst. Some months back Benjamin and I attended a performance of Tom Stoppard's newest play, "The Hard Problem." The title refers to the *hard problem* that secular materialists, hard core atheists, and scientific evolutionists have in explaining human *consciousness*. If everything is simply the product of dumb luck and time plus chance, then where did human personality come from? How is it that we can know and understand the world if there is not some overarching design behind it all? The key characters in the play are neuroscientists, biological reductionists, hard core evolutionists, secular unbelievers. Then, surprisingly, we watch the lead character, Hilary, get down on her knees and begin to pray. It is a pleasantly shocking moment. Hilary's prayer is a direct attack upon the assumptions of the materialist world of those among whom she lives. Her act of prayer shakes the foundation of the materialist assumptions of the characters in the play. And that is a good thing.

## **Close**

<sup>8</sup> And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. <sup>9</sup> But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. <sup>10</sup> This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

As we close, we began by noting the spiritual emptiness of the modern world and how it echoes the world of the first century. We have discovered in this passage a number of folk who started out with incomplete understanding of the message of the gospel. Apollos, and the twelve men Paul met with, were men of faith, but they were at the beginning of their spiritual search, they were not yet complete in their understanding of the faith. They believed in Jesus as a teacher, but they did not yet comprehend that

the message of the gospel is more about the person and work of Jesus Christ. What matters is that Jesus is God in human flesh. He is God-with-us. He offered himself as a substitute. He took the punishment we deserved. He gives us his righteousness, which we do not deserve. It is by placing our faith in God, through Christ, that we are freed to be the men and women God intends us to be.

Have you turned in faith to Christ? Do you believe in him as your Lord and Savior?

Do so today.

Say "Amen!" Somebody.

## Acts 18:24 – 19:10

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### **Paul in Ephesus**

**19** And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. <sup>2</sup> And he said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they said, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” <sup>3</sup> And he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They said, “Into John’s baptism.” <sup>4</sup> And Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.” <sup>5</sup> On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. <sup>6</sup> And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. <sup>7</sup> There were about twelve men in all.

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