

Acts 18:24

Apollos ... a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the scriptures

When I used to work at Plymouth Argyle one of the better responsibilities I was given

- Was to draft some notes for the player pen pictures
- That would appear in the club programme of the teams we visited
- These would list factual things such as a player's date and place of birth
- It would normally include his height and weight
- Before moving on to mention his previous clubs, team position and style of play

In Acts we meet a number of members of the apostolic preaching team

- I say 'apostolic preaching team', itself quite a slippery phrase
- Because it seems that the qualification for being an Apostle (capital A)
- Was to have seen the risen Lord personally
- Paul makes this plain in his great chapter on the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:3-9)

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

It is impossible for us to know who the 'more than five hundred brothers were'

- Though Barnabas was probably in that number (Acts 14:14)
- But as time goes by the eyewitness Apostles are supplemented by others
- And at the end of Acts 18 we are introduced to Apollos
- A learned man with a thorough knowledge of the scriptures

After Paul left Athens he headed for Corinth, the capital of the province of Achaia

- On a plateau overlooking the isthmus connecting central Greece to the north
- With Peloponnesus to the south, and dominated by an acropolis

Corinth was a city with two ports

- To the east was the port of Cenchrea leading out to the Aegean Sea
- And to the west was the port of Lechaem opening to the Adriatic
- Smaller ships were dragged for 3½ miles across the isthmus on wooden rollers
- While cargoes of larger ships were carried overland from port to port

There are some similarities with Plymouth and its two harbours, Devonport and Sutton

- and older Plymothians know that between the two harbours was Union Street
- not the present wilderness but a hot bed of activity, sailors, drinking houses
- and all that goes with it

Corinth was a city of wealth and luxury but alongside this there was immorality of every kind

- It was the centre of worship for the goddess Aphrodite (goddess of love)
- Which boasted a 1,000 cult prostitutes, while across the city were many pagan shrines
- to Corinthianize meant to be sexually immoral

It is not surprising that when Paul arrived in the city

- we learn he did so ‘in weakness and fear, and with much trembling’ (1Cor 2:3)
- which is not surprising knowing how often he had experienced rejection
- but he received some encouragement
- establishing a friendship Aquila and Priscilla, who risked their lives for him
- Jewish law directed that young theological students should be taught a trade
- And, apart from the obvious reason of being able to support himself
- This gave Paul the opportunity to make new contacts through his tentmaking work
- the synagogue door closed to him, God opened the door of the neighbouring house
- Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed
- And God gave him a renewed vision of the work he was to do

It is important to note, if only in passing

- Although Paul sometimes adapted his approach to the context
- He did not compromise his message
- This includes both his teaching about Jesus and his resurrection
- And his teaching about moral standards
- We live in an age where disregard for moral standards is not confined to a few cities
- Preachers are afraid to say some things are wrong in case people join another church
- All we can do is be consistent to the truth of Jesus and Christian living

When more and more people responded to Paul’s preaching

- His Jewish opponents attacked him and brought him into court
- Claiming that he was preaching an illegal religion, contrary to Roman law
- But Gallio, the proconsul, was not interested in internal religious disputes
- Setting a precedent for allowing Paul’s continued preaching for the coming decade

It seems that Paul, perhaps when he was discouraged, had taken a Nazarite vow

- A practice that Paul learned from his Jewish roots
- A Nazarite vow was a commitment to a period of special devotion and prayer
- Expressed by abstinence from wine and not cutting your hair
- At the end of this period of special devotion and prayer, the hair is shaved
- And put with the fellowship offering on the altar
- It was a mark of thanksgiving
- Such a vow was not striking a bargain with God
- But a means of affirming that we do not trust in ourselves but in God
- I suppose the nearest thing we have to this is our annual Covenant Service
- What we need to remember is that after we have prayed for something
- We need to be thankful that God hears and answers our prayers
- In fulfilment of this vow, Paul had to go to the Temple at Jerusalem
- This would explain why Paul went through Caesarea and up to Jerusalem
- Before moving on to Ephesus

Ephesus was the centre of the worship of the Greek goddess Artemis (Roman Diana)

- The temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world
- Artemis was the Greek goddess of fertility
- It was at Ephesus that Paul was joined by Apollos
- And Acts 18:24-28 give us a brief pen picture of Paul's new colleague
- He received an important place in this narrative because he had a significant role

From what we can learn of Apollos from the New Testament we discover he was:

- I SKILFUL IN THE SCRIPTURES
- II FORCEFUL IN HIS FERVOUR
- III POWERFUL IN HIS PREACHING
- IV HELPFUL IN HIS HUMILITY

- I SKILFUL IN THE SCRIPTURES

Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord ...

(Acts 18:24-25a)

There is a tendency in some circles today to a kind of anti-intellectualism

- We all know some good jokes about the minister who emptied the church by degrees
- Or the preacher who was MA, BD, mostly academic, basically dull
- But we must also realise that some of the greatest Christians
- Have been intellectual giants: St Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas
- Martin Luther and John Calvin
- That is why in the Reformed tradition, the minister's dress has been black
- This might seem a bit solemn – though in Africa black is the colour of celebration
- But the real reason is that black is the colour of the scholar's gown
- It is not that our preachers are priests in all their finery – but scholars of the Word
- At least, that is how it is meant to be

Apollos acquired his basic knowledge of the Word of God through the instruction he received

- But he himself needed to build on that foundation with his own study
- We live in an age where people do not seem to read as once they did
- If we are going to be skilful in the scriptures we are going to have to work at it

In case I should have been misunderstood before, let me state clearly

- I value the small group study where people come to share together
- This is rather like a fellowship meal
- Sunday by Sunday and at Bible class, we eat what the preacher/teacher has prepared
- But when we come to the small group we all bring something to share
- You would not be at all pleased if at the fellowship meal
- Someone brought an egg, some flour, sugar, salt and so on
- You would have much preferred them to go to the trouble of baking the cake
- So the person who turns up to the house group with nothing prepared to share
- Might have brought the ingredients but they certainly have not brought the cake

That's why the study book (to continue the metaphor) more or less equivalent to the recipe

- Is a useful guide, it does not do the study for you but it prompts you in a helpful way
- People who don't fill their housegroup with study soon fill it with other things
- In my experience some good (like prayer), others not so good

The net result of poor study of the scriptures is that what should be biblical preaching

- Is not very biblical
- And what should be biblical sharing in the small group is not very biblical either
- Biblical preaching and biblical sharing take time in preparation
- Time well spent
- But the word 'instructed' is the same word that we would render 'catechised'
- There is therefore the right foundation between being properly taught the basics
- And going on to study and to build on that foundation

Apollos was

I SKILFUL IN THE SCRIPTURES

II FORCEFUL IN HIS FERVOUR

he spoke with great fervour and taught about Jesus accurately
(Acts 18:25)

The word translated 'fervour' can also mean 'boil' as in boil water

- In short, Apollos is hot in his teachings about Jesus and taught accurately/diligently
- This is not just a matter of personality
- A particular personality might be an asset to preaching
- But it is not at the heart of what 'fervour' means
- My good friend Steve Wild is blessed with an extraordinary personality and is fervent
- A great preacher of the last century was Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones
- Chalk and cheese you might call them
- but 'the doctor', despite his lack of animation, was incredibly fervent
- It is not a matter of a vibrant personality

Fervour is not animation, or excitement, but confidence in the truth and power of the gospel

- This is grounded in the Holy Scriptures and empowered by the Holy Spirit
- Paul wrote to the Romans (12:11)

Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving
the Lord.

This is the same spirit that came upon Jeremiah

- 'I will make my words in your mouth a fire (Jeremiah 5:14)
- Word of God is 'living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword' (Heb 4:12)

Apollos was:

I SKILFUL IN THE SCRIPTURES

II FORCEFUL IN HIS FERVOUR

III POWERFUL IN HIS PREACHING

He began to speak boldly in the synagogue.

(Acts 18:26)

There are people today who think it is possible to be a powerful preacher

- Without being skilful in the scriptures
- Or forceful in fervour
- But it is simply not true
- A sermon that is little more than ‘blessed thoughts’ is not enough
- And heaven preserve us from the arid, Bible-denying scepticism that is so destructive

Apollos had a good knowledge of the Word, he had the fervour of a true believer

- He communicated accurately and boldly about Jesus
- Even here we should notice that Apollos is a ‘Jesus preacher’

There are some people who want to substitute this passion for the gospel of Jesus

- For entertainment as a means of attracting people into today’s church
- But if people are attracted by entertainment – all they will want is to be entertained
- But attracted by the Word of Truth, the Bread of Life, we will come to be fed
- And the Word of Truth bears testimony to Jesus, the Bread of Life

I have to tell you that my wife, Janet, is a really great cook

- But it was not always the case
- Before we were married she was not that great a cook
- But I have a good appetite and I made sure that she always had good ingredients
- Because she had good ingredients and I had a good appetite
- Even though it is often hard work, she took pleasure in her cooking
- As she improved, our expectations increased – it’s a virtuous circle

Now some cooks have different experiences

- Some people will pick at their food whatever it is – demoralising for the cook
- Some people moan whatever they are served – demoralising for the cook
- Some people will eat anything – undemanding and not challenging for the cook

In this metaphor the preachers are the cooks, the congregation the hungry family

- The preacher does not need you to pick at it, pushing it around your plate
- The preacher does not need you to moan about it
- The preacher does not need you just to eat anything
- The preacher needs proper training, the preacher needs good ingredients
- The preacher needs the proper resources
- The preacher needs you to have a good appetite
- Willingly scoffing the lot and coming forward for seconds

Apollos was:

- I SKILFUL IN THE SCRIPTURES
- II FORCEFUL IN HIS FERVOUR
- II POWERFUL IN HIS PREACHING

IV HELPFUL IN HIS HUMILITY

When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately. When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. On arriving, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed. For he vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.

Do you ever wonder how people who seem to know so much came to know so much?

- The answer of course is that they are learner-teachers
- They are ready to receive further instruction
- Apollos had made a good start – he had a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures
- But there was yet more for him to learn and he did so willingly, with humility

Now in the local church there are many people who aspire to leadership

- Some leadership roles have a higher profile, minister, local preacher, steward
- Others are not so readily seen, pastoral visitor, house group leader, youth leader
- What are the qualities that we are looking for in our leaders
- In one sense the obvious thing to look for is that they are good leaders/teachers
- But in another sense they need to be good followers/learners

In the local church a lot of trouble can be caused by people who want to lead/teach

- But don't want to follow/learn
- Following my two spells in college
- I have tried all my ministry to do as much following and learning as I can
- Spending 17 of my 22 years in intensive, distance-learning study
- And now 3 years in special postgraduate study
- I can't remember what I was up to in the years 1985-87, the two years that went astray

Apollos was learned but he was not a know all

- He had humility and was willing to be taught
- This teachable attitude should be true of every Christian
- For to be a true Christian is to be a disciple and to be a disciple is to be a learner
- At the heart of the biblical attitude to the Word is a childlike eagerness to be fed
- Craving pure spiritual milk, to grow up in salvation (1 Peter 2:2-3)

Like all great students, the more Apollos knew the more he realised he did not know

- But his new learning equipped him even more to help those who by grace believed
- For in his teaching he could take other people on – vigorously proving Jesus is Christ
- The essence of the Christian message is preached through Peter, Stephen, Paul
- Barnabas, Silas and now Apollos
- Jesus is the promised Saviour/Christ; The death of Jesus was part of God's plan
- God raised him as he promised; The resurrection of Jesus was witnessed and proved
- Jesus is glorified now and for ever; all must repent (of unbelief and disobedience)
- skilful in scripture, forceful in his fervency, powerful in preaching, helpful in humility