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St. Pitirim of Tambov

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Apollos was no ordinary man. Raised in Alexandria, at that time the intellectual center of Greco-Roman civilization; this young Jew was educated in the rich mix of two great cultures, the Hebraic and the Hellenic. It was in the synagogue at Alexandria that the Hebrew Scriptures had first been translated into Greek, causing Moses to speak with the tongue of Homer, and Job in the tones of Sophocles. Furthermore, it is entirely probable that Apollos was personally acquainted with the most famous member of the Alexandrian synagogue, the philosopher Philo (roughly 20 B.C to A.D. 50), who employed the insights of Plato to interpret the Old Testament.

Sometime before Aquila and Priscilla met him at Ephesus, Apollos had become a disciple of John the Baptist, one of several indications that the religious movement associated with John's name had spread well beyond Palestine. It is perhaps in his connection with John the Baptist that Apollos appears the most extraordinary. Since "he knew only the baptism of John" (Acts 18:25), we would not have expected Apollos to be familiar with the Holy Spirit. Other individuals, after all, who had been baptized only into "John's baptism," had "not so much as heard that there is a Holy Spirit" (19:2-3). The deficiency of John's baptism consisted in its inability to confer the Holy Spirit. In fact, John the Baptist had made this point himself: "I indeed, baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (Mark 1:8). In the case of Apollos, nonetheless, we are told that he was "boiling with the Spirit" (zeon to Pneumati - Acts 18:25).

This description of Apollos suggests that he had already become something more than a disciple of John the Baptist. Even previously, we are told, he had been "catechized (katechemenos) in the way of the Lord" (18:25), the same "way" (hodos) in which Aquila and Priscilla will instruct him further (18:26). Inasmuch as The Acts of the Apostles several times employs the identical "way" as a simple metaphor for the Christian life itself (16:17; 19:9,23; 22:4; 24:14,22), Luke's double application of this word to Apollos surely signifies that he was already pursuing the Christian faith, albeit with imperfect knowledge.

When they met Apollos in Ephesus early in the year 52, Aquila

and Priscilla were doubtless concerned about the church at Corinth, which they had left the previous year. As companions of the apostle Paul during the eighteen months that he had evangelized that troublesome place (cf. Acts 18:2-3,9-11), it perhaps seemed to them that the wisdom of Apollos, "an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures" (18:24), might be the very thing to renew the strength of that congregation. In any case, Apollos wanted to go to Corinth, so Aquila and Priscilla, having further instructed him, wrote a letter of recommendation for him, "exhorting the disciples to receive him", (18:26-27).

Nor were they disappointed, inasmuch as Apollos "greatly helped those who had believed through grace; for he vigorously refuted the Jews publicly, showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ" (18:27-28). So successful was Apollos's ministry, moreover, that the Corinthian church experienced a whole new influx of converts.

Unfortunately, some of the new converts, attracted by the superior education of Apollos, assumed a supercilious attitude toward the original but less gifted members of the Corinthian congregation, among whom there were "not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble" (1 Corinthians 1:26). This group, thus spurned, took to making indelicate comments about the "uppity newcomers," and before long the church was divided between those declaring "I am of Paul" and those proclaiming, "I am of Apollos" (112). Utterly mortified by this development Apollos returned to Ephesus.

He was present in Ephesus in the spring of 55, when an exasperated Paul wrote to address the sad situation at Corinth, which had meanwhile gotten even worse. Paul had hoped that Apollos would carry that epistle to the Corinthian church for him, but Apollos evidently found the whole matter too uncomfortable (16:12). In the following year we find him working as a missionary in Crete with a lawyer named Zenas (Titus 3:13).

St. Jerome much later tells us that Apollos returned to Corinth as its bishop, but I have my doubts. If this had been the case, Eusebius of Caesarea could hardly have failed to speak of it in his history of the early Church. The congregation at Corinth, moreover, continued to manifest a serious divisiveness until the end of the century. About the year 96 they received a very firm letter of reprimand on that matter from St. Clement, the third bishop of Rome.

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