

“Apollos”

Acts 18:24–28; 1 Corinthians 1:10–17; 3:1–9

God uses whom God uses, in bonds of unity. *E Pluribus Unum.*

On the Fourth of July, we celebrate the declaration of independence from the Crown by thirteen English colonies in North America. After fighting a war to win their freedom, these thirteen disparate colonies set about making themselves into the United States of America, setting aside some of their prerogatives for the sake of unity and the survival of this new nation.



Four score and seven years later a war was waged to hold together this unity and to abolish human slavery in the whole of the nation. What does any of this have to do with today’s scriptures and the story of Apollos, a first century contemporary of Paul? Take a look at the above passage from 1 Corinthians. This budding community of Christians in Corinth have divided themselves into factions, with varying allegiances. Paul simply won’t have it; he knows what is at stake. They must be united (there’s that word again), “of the same mind and of the same purpose.” It is clear that Paul is quite disgusted by the whole thing, resorting to mockery to try and get through to them -- whose who are Christ’s are one. It is that simple; a unity that rises above all the divisions of this world.

But here’s the thing -- unity is hard, even with the Holy Spirit’s help. As a boy, I stood at the start of school every day and recited the Pledge of Allegiance alongside all my classmates: “One nation, under God.” *E Pluribus Unum*: “out of many, one.” As I was growing up, “church” and “America” were practically synonyms. Everyone I knew was Christian, at least in name. Most of us went to church. All of us said the Pledge of Allegiance in school every day (without air conditioning for too many of those years). The cross was wrapped in the flag. The flag was draped around the cross. I’m not saying this was a good thing, because I’m pretty sure it wasn’t. I’m just saying that’s how it was.

And now, my how things have changed. Not only do we live in a vastly more diverse culture, but also, every new poll reveals the continued decline of religious belief in America, particularly Christianity. Fifty years ago, there was a lot of social pressure to attend church; it was pretty much expected of everyone. If you were going to sell cars on Monday, you better have been in church on Sunday. Now, every adult in church on a Saturday evening or a Sunday morning is a volunteer . . . *And therein lies the power, indeed, the power of the Holy Spirit.*

Nearly thirty years ago I read *Resident Aliens* by Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon. The theme of their book was that Christianity’s loss of the American culture would be a good thing. Becoming a community of genuine, committed “volunteers” rather than a church dominated by “cultural Christians” would strengthen not only the Church’s faith, but our witness to the world. I think events will prove that Hauerwas and Willimon got it right.

Why should we think that devout, committed Christians and “cultural” Christians would hold similar values or see the world in the same way? This goes even more so for the divide between Christians and non-Christians. There was a vast divide between the Christian communities in the first three centuries after Jesus and the pagan world in which they all lived, worshipped, worked, and died. The gulf was wide and the Jesus movement grew, in part, because many pagans saw in the Christians a life that they wanted for themselves and their children. Still, by AD 300, Christians probably made up no more than ten percent of the population (6 million in a population of about 60 million).¹ Their influence greatly outweighed their numbers, so much so that in the

¹ Population estimates of the ancient world are notoriously difficult. These come from the historian of sociology, Rodney Stark, found in the first chapter of his book, *The Rise of Christianity*. It is a book I can highly recommend if you are interested.

late third-century there was the first empire-wide persecution of Christians. Only a few decades later the Roman Emperor Constantine became a Christian and began to make it the state religion, and thus began the history of “cultural” Christians.

In the face of declining cultural influence in our time, many Christians seem to have become a bit combative. But the “war” to be fought is not to win the culture back, whatever that means, it is to become ever-truer disciples of Jesus. We are blessed to live in a land in which our freedom to exercise our faith is promised and guaranteed in our founding documents. The question for us is how we will use those freedoms, for what and to what end? What are you doing with your own life and why? How are you using the freedoms you enjoy?

And so on to Apollos

Apollos was free to exercise his religions, to travel, and to preach, which he did with a “burning enthusiasm” (Acts 18:25). Apollos is one the lesser-known figures in the New Testament. He was a Jewish Christian, both educated and eloquent, from Alexandria, Egypt, the second largest city in the Roman Empire. Alexandria was an important seat of learning and had a substantial and ancient Jewish community. Robert Wall tells us a bit more:

Acts tells us nothing about the church of Alexandria in Egypt—its origins, teaching, or practices. Yet Alexandria was second in influence only to Rome. It was not only a leading center of commerce and learning with a renowned library, but it also housed one of the most important communities of diaspora Jews in the Roman Empire. The great Jewish scholar Philo lived in Alexandria, and Apollos may well have been taught by him. In fact, the unusual predicate adjective λόγιος (logios, “eloquent”) expresses a characteristic of the educated person, since training in rhetoric was an essential part of education in Greco-Roman society²

We first meet Apollos in Ephesus, a very large city on the western coast of modern-day Turkey. He has come there to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. He does so knowledgeably and with a “burning enthusiasm.” It seems though that Apollos has some things to learn (who doesn’t!). He had not been taught well about the Christian practice of baptism, for he knows only about the baptism practiced by John the Baptist, probably a cleansing of repentance rather than a baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Many scholars believe that this also points toward Apollos not having received a proper baptism himself, lacking the work of the Holy Spirit within. To put it another way, he has not been born anew in Christ. Nonetheless, he had been a devoted and passionate disciple of Jesus and is anxious to learn. It is clear that he was a gifted speaker and well-educated. In the early years of the church, new disciples underwent a three year period of instruction culminating in their baptism and rebirth. We also need to remind ourselves that all of this is new, as the Jesus movement spreads.

In Ephesus, a wife-husband team, Priscilla and Aquila, take Apollos aside and teach him more about the Christian faith. Better equipped for his ministry, Apollos left Ephesus and headed for Corinth, where he would continue to play a prominent role in the young church. Robert Wall again:

The results of Priscilla and Aquila’s mentoring are immediate: “The believers [in Ephesus] encouraged [προτρέπτομαι *protreptomai*] him and wrote to the disciples [in Achaia] to welcome him” (v. 27). Evidently, this congregation, whose faith is cultivated by Priscilla and Aquila’s teaching, recognizes Apollos’s vocation and gifts. Their favorable impression of him is signaled by Luke’s use of *protreptomai*, which connotes the confirmation of a newly instructed teacher, and by the writing of a letter of introduction, an act of friendship and support. Upon his arrival, Apollos “greatly helped” in the catechesis of new believers and “powerfully refuted [διακατέλεγχομαι *diakatenchomai*] the Jews in public” from the Scriptures, now more fully understood. The repetition of Paul’s teaching in the synagogue that “Jesus is Messiah” (see 17:2–3) would suggest that Apollos’s own instruction is complete and that he has been brought into agreement with Paul’s christological interpretation of

² Robert W. Wall, *New Interpreter’s Bible*, 1994–2004, 10, 261.

Israel's Scriptures. Moreover, the powerful refutation of opponents suggests Apollos's filling with the Spirit of prophecy. The location of his public ministry in Corinth (see 19:1), however, is neither the synagogue, since Paul left it for Titus's house (see 18:6), nor the courtroom, since Gallio has closed its door (see 18:12–17). Therefore, he must be contesting unrepentant Jews in the town square. There his "eloquence" coupled with his elevated understanding of Scriptures ("showing by the scriptures") has funded teaching that "powerfully refuted" the unrepentant Jews who contest the gospel's claims.³

So far as we know, Apollos' passion never subsided. Nearly fifteen years after Apollos first appeared in Ephesus, Paul urges Titus to see that Apollos lacks nothing in his work of proclaiming the gospel (Titus 3:13). NT Wright reminds us that there are many ways God works in and through us. The story of Apollos is ample demonstration of that truth.

Luke offers us no set pattern for the way in which people come, step by step, into full membership of the Christian family and full participation in all the possibilities that are thereby open to them. Sometimes it happens this way, sometimes that. Just as humans grow to maturity at different paces, and some make great strides in one area while others have to catch up later, so it seems to be in the church. What matters is that we are open, ready to learn even from unlikely sources, and prepared for whatever God has to reveal to us through the scriptures, the apostolic teaching, and the ongoing and always unpredictable common life of the believing family.⁴

Finally, as I'm sure Apollos urged alongside Paul, we Christians are to be unified and disciplined. We are to love one another. We are to serve one another. We are to be agreeable, sympathetic, and humble. We are not to retaliate when wronged.

When we live in this way, when we take care of those in need, when we boldly tell others the Good News . . . in all this, we are witnesses to God's grace and the saving power of the gospel. As Jesus' disciples, we earnestly seek to tell the Good News, to bear the fruit of God's Spirit every day, and to care for all those who need help with even the basics of life.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ NT Wright, *Acts for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 13-28*, (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008), 108–109.