

Marks of a Church Builder: Hard Work and Teachability

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 January 2021

Preacher: Paul Brennan

[0 : 00] But we're going to turn this morning to our Bibles, and if you'd like to turn in your Bible with me, we're going to read together in the Acts of the Apostles. Last week, Paul Brennan led us through the first part of chapter 18 of the Acts, and we're going to pick up the story at verse 18 of chapter 18, where after the commotion that there was in Corinth due to Paul's preaching and the opposition of the synagogue and those who tried to silence him and throw him out, were themselves silenced by the law courts.

After this, verse 18, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with them Priscilla and Aquila.

At Kentria, he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow, and they came to Ephesus, and he left them there. But he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews.

When they asked him to stay for a longer period, he declined, but on taking leave of them, he said, I will return to you if God wills. And he set sail from Ephesus.

When he'd landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church and then went down to Antioch. After spending some time there, he departed and went from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.

[1 : 34] Now, a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the scriptures. He'd been instructed in the way of the Lord, and being fervent in the spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus.

Although he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. And when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him and explained to him the way of God more accurately.

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.

For he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.

Amen. And may God bless to us his word. Well, good morning, folks.

[2 : 43] And please do turn your Bibles at home there to Acts chapter 18, which was read earlier for us. And it's the second half of chapter 18 we're looking at this morning. So chapter 18 of Acts from verse 18.

Now think about, ponder what is required to build a healthy church. That is a massively important question, because nothing can be more important in this world than the only institution that is building for eternity.

What makes for a strong, healthy, growing church? What key qualities would you put down as essential for church leaders today?

I think we perhaps underestimate what is required to see a growing, flourishing, strengthened church. We each see glimpses of it. The Sunday gatherings, the growth group, the release of the word catering team, the cleaning team.

But a few of us see the whole thing. We don't really know what goes on behind the scenes in the quiet of the study, the phone calls, the meetings.

[3 : 58] Healthy, growing churches don't just happen. Yes, the Lord, in his grace, is at work. The church is a supernatural body.

It cannot grow apart from the work of God. But a lot of hard work from a human perspective is required.

Hard work and also real humility. A desire to serve the church with the willingness to have one's ego set to the side.

That is what we're being shown here in the second half of Acts 18. Luke is lifting the hood. We see under the bonnet to the mechanics of what it takes to see a church thrive.

That's the fruit we see in both of these paragraphs. Notice at the end of the first paragraph, verse 23, we see that Paul went from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.

[5 : 05] Look also at the end of verse 27. When Apollos arrived in Corinth, he greatly helped those who through grace have believed.

So in both these paragraphs, you see strengthened disciples and greatly helped believers. What's required from a human perspective?

What's required for a strengthened church? What does it take to see believers greatly helped? What qualities does a church builder need?

And two things that Luke is emphasizing, I think, for us in this passage. The first is hard work, and the second is humility. Hard work and humility. So let's look at the first paragraph.

This is really focused on Paul, his willingness to travel huge distances. And we see in this first paragraph, hard work. Here's what Luke is showing us.

[6 : 06] Now we're being shown, I think, without particular attention being drawn to it, that great effort, personal sacrifice, a willingness to take risks are necessary if the church is to grow and mature.

Now we can skim over these words quite quickly. It seems almost like a bit of a linking paragraph. It's a very quick travel summary.

We read about Paul heading off from Corinth. He goes to Ephesus, and then Caesarea, then Jerusalem, Antioch, and then up to the regions of Galatia and Phrygia. But can I just slow us down a moment and notice the huge distances that are involved here?

Remember, Paul did not have access to a plane or a helicopter or a car. He was on his own two feet and the occasional boat. The journey from Corinth to Ephesus was about 500 kilometers by boat.

From Ephesus to Caesarea was another 1,000 kilometers by boat. From Caesarea to Jerusalem, about 110 kilometers on foot. And then from Jerusalem to Antioch, about 700 kilometers again on foot.

[7 : 20] And then from Antioch to Ephesus, at least 1,000 kilometers on foot. That's roughly 3,500 kilometers that Paul travels in this paragraph.

Most of it on foot. Now that's the equivalent of you or I walking from London to Glasgow about five times. Imagine the state of your feet after doing that.

And at least you and I would be wearing the latest walking boots available, the very best socks that you can wear, blister packs, all that kind of stuff. But none of that for the Apostle Paul. Imagine the state of his feet after this journey.

That is a lot of ground to cover, especially then. No travel comforts that we enjoy today. No major motorways. No service stations.

Hard graft and much danger would have characterized his journeys. Shipwrecks were common. Why go to these extraordinary lengths?

[8 : 29] Why does he keep moving on? Why does he move so quickly? From Ephesus, notice there in verse 20, the folk are keen to keep him. But Paul declines, opting to head for Jerusalem and then Antioch.

Why do it? Well, it seems his great goal is what Luke observes there in verse 23. That is strengthening all the disciples. That was Paul's concern.

You see, Paul's not just about breaking new ground for the gospel. Yes, he goes to new places. He is often the first to bring the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to a new area or new city.

But he also revisits the places he's been. He does so in person and also through the writing of his letters. His method of establishing and building churches was not a one-hit wonder.

He didn't just go to one place once and then leave it. No, quite the opposite. And especially with the two cities where he spends so much time in chapters 18 and 19. Corinth, where he's just been, and then Ephesus, where we'll see next week.

[9 : 44] He spends years in these two cities. But the focus in our few verses this morning are the churches that are now well-established in Antioch and up into Galatia and on into Phrygia.

These are churches that Paul has established already. Some of them on his very first missionary journey. And he's now been there several times. And this pattern of revisiting places he's already been, that was not new to Paul.

Back at the end of chapter 15, which we saw probably a few years ago, we've been working through Acts very slowly, but a few years ago we saw that at the end of chapter 15, he goes through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

That was one of Paul's major goals. Not just going to new places, but revisiting old. Establishing and strengthening the churches. It's clearly a major priority for Paul.

And we know that not only because he keeps doing it, for some of these places it was the fourth time he had been to visit them. We know it's a major priority not only because he keeps doing it, but also because of the huge and great lengths that he would go to in order to go and see them.

[11 : 01] Huge distances he was prepared to travel. Great danger he was willing to endure. He knew that it was not enough simply to establish a church, to install a local leadership and move on.

No, he knew that constant revisiting, oversight and help, further teaching was absolutely necessary. if the church was to thrive. He knew the absolute importance of seeing his brothers and sisters in the flesh, seeing them eye to eye, looking at them, seeing their reactions, being able to teach them and to share in the sacraments.

things. If Zoom was an option for the Apostle Paul back then, then I don't think he would have taken it, at least in this chapter. He would still have departed from Corinth, taken the many thousands of kilometer journey to go and see his brothers and sisters in the flesh.

And that is important, isn't it, for us to grasp? the importance of being together, face to face, in the flesh. Many of us feel, don't we, instinctively the importance of being able to gather, particularly because it's been denied us so often this past year.

But we also know that the command to gather physically is, it's a command, isn't it? Hebrews chapter 10, let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day approaching.

[12 : 48] One theologian wrote this week in light of the restrictions on corporate worship he said, the gathering is the arena in which the principal means of God's grace to us are found, most notably in the preaching of the word and the sacraments.

If he has ordained his body to function like this, then we will find that not doing so is spiritually and psychologically harmful, as it has evidently been for many in recent months.

God's people, he says, cannot flourish apart from their gathering. And Paul demonstrates, doesn't he, with his actions here, the importance of physically meeting together by this determination, this willingness to travel almost 4,000 kilometers, most of it on foot.

he knew that the key element, a key element of the church's flourishing was his being able to gather with them, physically see them, talk to them, touch them.

And that takes great effort, doesn't it? For Paul to plan this journey, to prepare, to get on the boat, to walk all that way, easier in many ways to stay in Corinth.

[14 : 16] But he knew that if those churches back in Galatia and Phrygia were to be strengthened, he would have to go and see them. And likewise for us, in many ways, it is easier to watch this broadcast service from our couch with a cup of tea in hand.

But as soon as restrictions are eased and we're meeting in person, it's going to require effort to gather. We need to say no to the couch.

Even if you've got the most comfortable couch in Glasgow, say no and yes to getting into the shower, getting dressed, and getting to church. It's vitally important.

But we do it not just for our own spiritual good, but for the good of others. As we gather, we strengthen one another. And hard work is required from all of us, not just for those who have leadership roles in the church, but all of us.

Together, we have a responsibility to strengthen the church. And Luke is showing us that taking that responsibility seriously means hard work.

[15 : 30] making sacrifices, sometimes traveling great distances in order to strengthen others, and also traveling short distances. Hard work.

And especially for church leaders and those set aside full time. Be under no illusion if you're considering full-time gospel work in the future.

It's hard work. remember the apostle Paul here. Remember the 3,300 kilometers covers in just five verses.

Remember his feet. Follow his example of sacrificial service for the good of the church as he himself follows the example of Jesus Christ Christ, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, and being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Jesus Christ did that for his church, and we, each of us, are called to follow him, and to likewise give of ourselves sacrificially for him and for his precious people, the church.

[17 : 06] Strengthen churches. It requires hard work. That's the first thing Luke is showing us here, as he focuses on Paul's travels all across the Mediterranean.

Hard work is needed if the church, if believers are to be strengthened. That's the first thing, hard work. Secondly, is humility, and this is our second paragraph, with Apollos and his teachability.

That's what we see in verses 24 to 28, humility. Now this paragraph comes as a bit of a jolt. If you were to sit down and just read through from Acts chapter 13, the focus is, humanly speaking, very much on the apostle Paul, almost exclusively.

It's about him, where he goes, what he does, what he says. So as you read through there from chapter 13, you bump into words and sentences like this. Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos, and Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly.

They stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city. And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, and all the assembly fell silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul.

[18 : 26] And after some days, Paul said to Barnabas, let us return and visit the brothers in every city. Paul also came to Derbe and Lystra. Paul, Paul, Paul. It's all about Paul. So it comes a bit of a shock here, doesn't it, to not only have the camera move away from Paul, but to have it moved onto something we've not yet met in the narrative.

It's a brand new character in the story. Look at verse 24, now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus.

It's a bit of a shock. After all this attention on Paul. But by the end of the paragraph, we see that through this chap Apollos, the believers in Corinth are greatly helped.

It's as if Luke is reminding us, highlighting for us, that the key to churches being strengthened and discipled is not the Apostle Paul. If this paragraph is not here, you might be tempted to answer the question, what is the key to building up the church with a name?

Paul, he's the answer. Paul is the answer to strengthened churches. Send him, send the Apostle Paul, he'll sort it out, he's the answer. Well, it's certainly true, isn't it, that the Apostle Paul was greatly used by the Lord.

[19 : 52] He is an absolute central figure in the establishment of the early church. But the Lord wasn't constrained to use only him. The Lord has other workers, other people that he's pleased to use for his purposes.

That's what we see with this little paragraph on Apollos. People like him can also help the church. And that's important for us to remember because we can become sometimes too attached to one particular person who has been greatly used by the Lord and who has greatly helped us.

Thank the Lord for that person, yes, but don't become overly attached to them. You see, they are only under-shepherds whose job it is to point us to the great shepherd himself, the Lord Jesus Christ.

You see, the problem with latching on to an under-shepherd is that they are fallible. And they are likely at some stage to let us down, either because of their own limits and weaknesses, just the very fact they're human, and sometimes because of great sin.

And that is something we see sadly very often, isn't it? Great leaders, charismatic leaders, eloquent leaders, they can have secret and destructive sins that can, when brought out into the open, be absolutely devastating.

[21 : 25] So don't be too attached to one particular church leader or one particular person because they can let you down. But also, that attachment can sometimes prevent you from being open to help from others.

You expect a visit from the minister or one particular person, but when somebody else turns up, a younger minister or somebody else in the congregation with no official role, they come around, they seek to help you.

You don't want to receive the help, or you can't because wrongly you think, it can only come from that one person. But the Lord is not constrained in that way. He uses all sorts of people in order to strengthen and encourage the church.

And that is what Luke is showing us here. He can use this chap, Apollos. He goes where Paul has spent a lot of time. He's been in Corinth for some time, but later on Apollos comes and he greatly helps the believers in Corinth.

It didn't have to be Paul. The law can use others. Now we're told quite a bit of information about this man, Apollos, there at the very start of this paragraph.

[22 : 39] He is from Alexandria, and that was very much a major intellectual power house of the ancient worlds. It's in Egypt, it's on the coast, about 200 kilometers northwest of Cairo.

It was the Cambridge or Oxford of the time, known for its huge library, biggest library in the world at the time. And Apollos was a bright chap.

He was eloquent, an able speaker, look at verse 24, eloquent, competent in the scriptures, he's been instructed in the way of the Lord, fervent in spirit.

Clearly, Apollos was an able man, an impressive man, remarkably gifted. And as we see from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he was a man able to draw a following.

He was able to pull people around him. But even though he was able and bright and well taught in the scriptures, he was, it seems, a little off in some areas.

[23 : 47] You get a hint of that there in verse 25, don't you? Look at the end there. He spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only of the baptism of John. And look on to verse 26.

When he gets to, well, it's when he's in Ephesus still, he began to speak boldly in the synagogue. And Priscilla and Aquila, when they heard him, they took him, they drew him aside, and they explained to him the way of God more accurately.

Now, the particular issue with Apollos, I think, is regarding the baptism of John. That was the extent of his knowledge. And John's baptism was limited because it was preparatory.

It was preparing the way for the Messiah, who had now come. And Apollos, he needed to understand more fully the implications of Christ's coming.

Perhaps he wasn't up to speed with the events of Pentecost, what that meant in terms of Jesus sending the Spirit on the church. And notice the way in which Priscilla and Aquila wisely deal with him.

[24 : 58] Firstly, they do actually deal with him. They speak to him. They don't think he's untouchable because he's got considerable giftings. No, they do go and speak to him.

There can be a danger. People can see him because of their abilities beyond correction. But they speak to him privately. They took him and explained to him the way more accurately.

Accurately. I suppose they could have gone in with all guns blazing, couldn't they, and publicly refuted him. But that would not have been wise in this case. Apollos, it seems, was one of the good guys.

He wasn't teaching false doctrine. He was just a little lacking in one or two areas of his understanding. He wasn't aware of some matters seemingly to do with the Holy Spirit.

Look down a bit beyond what we read earlier to chapter 19 and verse 2, which gives us an insight as to what might have been the issue that Priscilla and Aquila raised with Apollos, given that he knew only of the baptism of John.

[26 : 04] 19 verse 2 there records when Paul returns to Ephesus 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.

And he said, into what then were you baptized? And they said, into John's baptism. 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.

On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. So it seems as if Apollos perhaps hasn't received instruction about the Holy Spirit, who is, as we know, given to anyone on the moment of their conversion.

There's no such thing as a Christian who is not Spirit-filled. But now, after a conversation with Priscilla and Aquila, Apollos is more fully informed.

He knows now that John's baptism was limited as preparatory, and that now people must be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. So Apollos has been brought up to speed. He's now more able to fully unpack the scriptures.

[27 : 20] It's all very well handled, isn't it, by Priscilla and Aquila. They're very wise in how they go about it. But it's also well received by Apollos.

And we see here the humility of Apollos. He was, to many observers, a big shot, very able, eloquent, an influencer.

He was a big shot, but seemingly not in his own eyes. He receives this instruction from Priscilla and Aquila. Now remember who we're dealing with here.

Remember their backgrounds. Apollos, the educated Oxbridge type, able, eager, full of energy and eloquence. And then you've got Priscilla and Aquila, the religious refugees from Rome who've ended up in Ephesus, and they're tent makers.

They're leather workers. Quite a difference there in background. Can you imagine a couple of refugees living in Glasgow, pulling aside Professor John Lennox and just putting them right on a few matters of his theology?

[28 : 34] That's something of the dynamic we've got going on here. But Apollos is humble enough, isn't he, to receive the correction. He allows himself to be corrected, and that is all to the good of the church.

It does seem, doesn't it, that he has gladly learned from all that Priscilla and Aquila taught him. Look at verse 27, where after some time in Ephesus, he is then sent off to go to Corinth with a letter of commendation.

They wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. Now, surely they would not have done that if Apollos had resisted the instruction given there by Priscilla and Aquila.

But no, they're happy to send him, they want him to go, they send this letter of commendation. Apollos' great and obvious giftings would have been useless if not accompanied by real humility.

That's what we're being shown here, isn't it? A very able man, but also a humble man. Great gifts. They must be matched by great humility if the church is to be helped and strengthened.

[29 : 49] He was teachable. And that is a crucial quality and a central quality for those who have teaching responsibility in the church. church. It's better by far to have humility and relatively minor gifts than to have great gifts, significant gifts, at the hands of a proud and unteachable man.

Much better to have the former than the latter. And Apollos' willingness to be taught his humility despite considerable gifts meant that he was able to be a real blessing to the church.

Notice the impact he has there in Corinth, verse 27. When he arrived in Corinth, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.

You see, he's now equipped, isn't he, with the knowledge that the preparatory mission of John has now been fulfilled by the death, the resurrection, the ascension of Jesus.

He's now even better able to take on the Jews in public to powerfully refute them. He is a significant asset to the church in Corinth.

[31 : 11] And note that his humility does not mean he's a walkover. No, absolutely not. He takes the Jews head on, publicly. He's a man marked by humility and courage.

And as the Apostle Paul later reflects in his letter to the church there, he says that I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.

So humble servants, humble servants who realize, great as their gifts may be, that it is God who gives the growth.

They are the sort of people that God can use and does use for the building up of his church. Proud, unteachable folk will, despite looking promising initially, despite impressing with their eloquence, will in the end prove unfruitful because they're unteachable.

But a humble, teachable man can be a great blessing to the church. That's what Luke's showing us here this morning with Apollos. A very able, remarkably gifted man, but also humble and able to be used.

[32 : 27] That is what the church needed then and also needs today. Men and women who are hardworking and humble, willing to make great sacrifices and teachable.

So pray. Pray that your leaders, pray for them that those two qualities would be evident in their lives, committed to hard work and humble.

Pray that there will be leaders, full-time or those in secular work with leadership roles in the church. Pray that there will be leaders of the future growing up in the church who demonstrate hard work and humility.

Pray that those coming through Tron Youth and Activate and Release the Word would be hardworking and humble. Parents, model these qualities to your children so that they grow themselves to be hardworking and humble.

You can't expect your children to demonstrate these qualities if you yourself are lazy and proud. Be humble, be hardworking.

[33 : 36] These are the attributes, the qualities, the attitudes that the Lord is pleased to use in order to build his church and strengthen his precious children.

These aren't the only two qualities, but the qualities Luke is showing us here this morning. The Lord is pleased to use people like that. Those who work hard and are humble.

And there can be no greater joy for us, can there, in this life than to be useful in the great building project that the risen Lord Jesus is now undertaking.

No greater joy, no greater privilege than to be involved in that. He is at this very moment continuing the work that he began and which is recorded for us here in Luke's account. And he invites you and can use you if you are willing to work hard and if you come with a humble and teachable attitude.

It's the greatest privilege of our lives, isn't it, to be involved in this eternal work, this building of the church which will last for all eternity. So come.

[34 : 45] Come and join him, the Lord Jesus. Build with him for eternity. Strengthen the disciples. Help those who have believed for Christ's sake.

Well, let me pray as we close, shall I? Father God, we do thank you that all that you are doing in your world, building your church, is something that will last for all eternity.

You are building an eternal people who will reign with you forever. And so, give each of us that great vision of being partners with you in that work.

And would you please keep us from pride, keep us from laziness, but rather help us to see what you are doing and so gladly give of ourselves to humble ourselves, to give all of ourselves, give our best for what you are doing in your world.

Lord, help us to do that before we ask it. In Jesus' name. Amen.