

Acts 18:18-28**“Christians at Work”****July 31, 2016****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

After a year and a half of extremely fruitful work in the great city of Corinth, Paul made his way back to Antioch to report to the home church on his labors. Along the way he made a brief stop in Ephesus, a stop that was to result in several years of labor there on his next missionary tour, and then spent some days in Jerusalem.

Text Comment

v.18 That his final destination was Syria indicates that his intention was to return to Antioch and the church there that had sent him out in the first place. They deserved an account of what had been accomplished. Priscilla and Aquila accompanied him, perhaps in part because they had been living in Corinth only because they had been driven out of Rome by the emperor’s decree and perhaps because they were now considered part of Paul’s missionary team. The latter may account for the fact that he was to leave them in Ephesus, apparently to begin a more formal church planting work there.

This was a Nazirite vow, the vow described in Numbers 6, a vow of special consecration to the Lord. It could have been prompted by Paul’s thanksgiving for God’s blessing his ministry in Corinth and protecting him from harm there when so many enemies were arrayed against him. It could have been for something still more personal and private. In any case, during the time of the vow one’s hair was not to be cut. The conclusion of the vow would be marked by the shaving of the head and offering sacrifice at the temple. This is another demonstration of the fact that Paul was still happily a Jew himself and a practicing Jew at that. So long as obedience to such liturgical laws and regulations was not motivated by a false principle – as it was when Jews demanded such practices of Gentile Christians – he was not only happy to encourage the Jews to continue in their ancient practices but to do so himself as well. Presumably Paul, days later, offered sacrifices in the temple in Jerusalem to complete his Nazirite vow properly.

v.19 If you remember, earlier on this same missionary tour, Paul had been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to enter Asia, the Roman province where Ephesus was located. Now he was free to stop there *en route* to the east.

v.21 The Western text of the book of Acts – this is a longer Greek text generally not considered to be as reliable – adds that Paul’s reason for refusing to stay was that he wanted to be in Jerusalem for the feast, that is, for Passover. That will have been the case all the more if he intended to complete his Nazirite vow with sacrifices at the temple. As we will learn in chapter 19 he soon made good on this promise to return to Ephesus.

v.22 “*Went up* and greeted the church” almost certainly refers to a visit to Jerusalem, from which he would have *gone down* to Antioch.

- v.23 In other words the third missionary journey had begun as Paul traveled overland, visiting the churches he had established previously. On this third campaign Paul would spend almost all his time, several years, in Ephesus.
- v.24 The fact that he hailed from Alexandria is no insignificant detail. Alexandria was the second largest city in the Roman Empire and the intellectual center of the Hellenistic world, that world dominated by Greek civilization but now overtaken by Roman power. Its famous library held more than 400,000 volumes. It was in Alexandria, if you remember, that Jewish scholars translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek, the translation known as the Septuagint. The city had an immense Jewish population. In other words, Apollos had the intellectual background and the scholarly credentials to become an influential teacher of the faith. [Peterson, 525] You are aware, perhaps, that some scholars have identified Apollos as the likely author of the New Testament's letter to the Hebrews.
- v.25 In other words, he knew the Scriptures we call the Old Testament, he knew of the ministry of John, and of the ministry of Christ, but he, somehow, had not heard of the developments since Pentecost. Apollos was a natural missionary; he knew enough to know there was important news to be spread and he was spreading it. Apollos reminds me of that young man Allen Pritzlaff once told us about who, in the early days of the gospel's rapid advance in Kazakhstan after the fall of the Soviet Union had become a Christian and immediately an eager and successful evangelist, winning many of his family and many from his village to faith in Christ. He came into the mission office one day and overheard someone refer to the apostle Paul. "Who is that?" this young man asked. He knew about Jesus but since only a few parts of the NT had been translated he had never heard of Paul. An able evangelist who had much to learn: that was Apollos! News traveled more slowly in those days of course and if Apollos had been in Alexandria all this time it is not hard to understand why he might have missed hearing of the apostolic developments.
- v.26 That is, they acquainted him with the recent history of the gospel's advance and with Paul's teaching, which Apollos was delighted to learn and to incorporate into his own teaching. It is fascinating to speculate, but we simply do not know what it is that Apollos knew and accurately taught and what Priscilla and Aquila had to teach him. He must have known of the cross and the resurrection, if he knew what Luke refers to here as "the way of the Lord," but what did he *not* know?
- v.27 Why Apollos wished to go to Achaia is not said, but it may have had something to do with Aquila and Priscilla having told him of the fierce opposition the Jews there had mounted against Christian preaching. Remember, Achaia was where Corinth was. Apollos was just the man to contend with Jewish opposition, as indeed would prove to be the case. Paul would later say that while he planted the gospel seed in Corinth, it was Apollos who watered it.
- v.28 All Christians, of course, are not scholars, philosophers, or theologians, but it helps immensely when the Lord furnishes the church with such men, as he always has, great

minds able both to educate and inspire the faithful and refute the arguments of the unbelieving.

I want to consider with you this morning, from this fascinating window on Christian life and ministry in the apostolic age, one highly important Christian technique or method for advancing the gospel. I am speaking of the centrality of the Christian home as a place of ministry. We have already spoken of the prayer meeting that took place in Mary's home in Jerusalem of which we read in chapter 12, of the hospitality extended to Christian missionaries, to Peter by Simon the tanner in Joppa, and to Paul by Lydia in Philippi, and of evangelistic meetings in the homes of Cornelius the centurion in Caesarea in chapter 10 and the jailer in Philippi in chapter 16. And last Lord's Day, in the earlier verses of this chapter, we read of Titius Justus who invited Paul into his home not only providing a place for him to stay but a venue for preaching and teaching.

And now we have Priscilla and Aquila using their home as a place of discipleship, teaching a brilliant man what he needed to know about the progress of the gospel from Pentecost to the present hour. Now, to be sure, the word "home" is not found in our text and it is at least theoretically possible that Priscilla and Aquila brought Apollos up to date in a local pub. But the likelihood of that is vanishingly small. One valuable commentator on the passage actually translates the word in v. 26, which the ESV renders simply "took him" and which means more literally "took him aside," "they invited him to their home." [Peterson, 526] Almost all commentators assume that it was in their home that these conversations took place (e.g. Bruce, 382).

Further reason for assuming this is provided elsewhere in the New Testament. We already learned in 18:3 that Paul had stayed with the couple in their home in Corinth. These were hospitable people. Moreover, having remained in Ephesus when Paul went on to Jerusalem and Antioch, they are found still there, with a church meeting *in their home*, when Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians (16:19). We learn from Romans 16:3-5 that after the death of the Emperor Claudius, who had expelled the Jews from Rome, they had returned to the capital, and were hosting a church *in their home* there. Obviously this was a couple with means, able to purchase homes of considerable size in Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome, but as obviously they were a couple used to opening their home for the purpose of ministry. When Paul says in Romans 16:4 that all the Gentile churches gave thanks to God for these two intrepid Christian workers, we are being given some idea of how wide-ranging their ministry was and how many Christians – no doubt most of whom had been in their home – had profited from it through the years.

So see Priscilla and Aquila sitting down in their kitchen or reclining in their dining room and having long talks with Apollos about all that happened since the resurrection of Jesus over a plate of Greek olives and a glass of iced tea. And picture Apollos, soaking it all in, furiously jotting notes on his yellow legal pad, asking questions, then later, in his room, entering those notes in the margins of his wide-margin Septuagint.

In any case, they had been in the synagogue on the Jewish Sabbath when Apollos appeared and began to speak. They realized at once that this was no ordinary man. His intellect and his oratory were equally impressive and they could tell easily enough that he was a genuine believer, a follower of the Lord who was determined to make the Messiah known. But it was a pity, they

thought, that he didn't know as much as they did about either the gospel or the way in which it was being preached by the apostles. We would, as I said, love to know what Apollos did not yet know, but apparently the gaps in his knowledge were significant.

Wisely, they realized that the best way to help this man was not to correct or even denounce him publicly, but to take him aside and fill in the picture for him. [Bruce, 360] And this they did, no doubt over a number of days and nights at their home.

We in the western world, and especially in the *American* Christian world, have come over the past centuries to think of the church building as the center of a congregation's ministry – with many exceptions of course – but it was not so and could not have been so in those earliest days when the fledgling church had no buildings of her own. Still, much later, when the church had her own sanctuaries, comparatively little ministry was conducted there apart from services of worship on the Lord's Day. The idea that a minister would have his office and would see people *at the church* is, in fact, a very recent and largely American innovation. In Britain and Europe generally still today it is a practice virtually unheard of. The minister meets people in his home or in theirs.

And there can be no doubt that the home is a natural venue for Christian ministry. Its informality and familiarity puts people at ease. Its comfort makes them happy to remain for hours on end. Good food can create an atmosphere conducive to honest talk. *We might think of the church as a salt mine and the homes of its members as salt shakers.* Many people then as now would be far less likely to visit a congregation of Christians at worship than to spend time with a Christian family in their home.

And, by and large, homes are today what they were in those days and people are today in their homes as they were long ago. There is something very natural, almost inevitable about a Christian home becoming a gospel outpost. I have seen this as you have, but we have also heard of situations in which it was famously the case.

The ministry of Francis Schaeffer in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s began, innocently enough, as an extension of their home life. Their daughters brought home school friends, then others came to visit, and soon L'abri was born. A small chapel was eventually built to handle the entire community at worship, but I remember being at L'abri in the early 1970s and listening to a lecture in what was obviously a living room. And for years later, though now they had purchased several homes in that small Swiss village, it continued to have the flavor of a home: conversations about Christ and the meaning of life around the dinner table, continued in the living room or on the porch overlooking the magnificent Alps.

In the same way, Ian Tait's – the British pastor known to this congregation – ministry in Welwyn, England was the extension of his home. It was a very large home, too big for his family, and so they turned some of its available rooms into living accommodations for younger professional men who worked in Cambridge or in London. They tried to keep an even number of believers and unbelievers at one time so that evangelistic friendships and conversations could flourish in the house. Mrs. Tait served the evening meals and through the years a number of those young men came to faith in Christ.

Of course I am not suggesting that every Christian's home ought to expand into a ministry such as L'abri or the Tait's home Guessens. But surely we learn here and elsewhere in Acts that the Christian home can be and should be a place of ministry – to the children of the family in the first place, of course – but to others as well. If Christians are devoted to Christ, surely that devotion should be evident chiefly where they live, where they are most themselves, and where opportunities come apace to draw others in, as they did for Priscilla and Aquila everywhere they lived as Christians.

Let's take our inspiration from the testimony of the Christian ages to the policy of open home ministry. In all manner of different ways Christians have used their homes as places of testimony and ministry.

For example, there is a home at Pompeii that was destroyed in moments in the eruption of Vesuvius in A.D. 79. Indeed, seven children were trapped in one of the rooms off the central atrium and their skeletons have been recovered in the excavations of the home. We know it was a Christian home, in what was very definitely *not* a Christian town, because the impluvium – the basin in the floor designed to catch the rainwater that fell through the open ceiling of the atrium – the entrance hall of this large Roman house – has a mosaic in its floor of a face that was almost certainly intended to be Jesus because on the left of it are two crossed fish and on the right a lamb. One wonders how many evangelistic conversations began as hosts stood with newly arrived visitors in the atrium explaining the meaning of that mosaic.

Hospitality was widely employed as an evangelistic technique in the early centuries of Christian advance, as Aquila and Prisca no doubt employed their home for that purpose as well. The third century missionary bishop Gregory was the son of an affluent home in Pontus, from which, you remember, Priscilla and Aquila hailed. He was traveling as a young man to Beirut to study law when, passing through the port city of Caesarea, he happened to meet Origen, a man in many ways like Apollos. Origen prevailed on him to delay his legal studies and to study with him. In his *Panegyric* to Origen, written many years later, Gregory gives the impression of long conversations, almost certainly conducted in Origen's home, conversations in which Origen's powerful arguments and winning personality completely won over the young man. Later Gregory became one of the most fruitful Christian ministers of the third century. Indeed, on his deathbed, he is said to have given thanks to God that he was leaving to his successor a diocese in which there were as few unbelievers as there had been Christians when he began his ministry! All because a Christian man had opened his home to a young student.

Gregory's personal history reminds me of Robert Haldane in Geneva in the early 1800s. When he came there the university students were being taught pure unbelief in the Genevan academy, the seminary John Calvin had begun to champion the Reformation. Haldane was a Scot who had grown up in a wealthy family and whose plans for a gentleman's career were suddenly interrupted by his powerful conversion to faith in Christ. Anxious to serve the Lord he committed himself to evangelistic efforts in his native Scotland to great effect. Haldane would travel to Europe in the summers and on one occasion he found himself in Geneva, and there he drew around him a group of young students at the Academy to whom he delivered lectures on Romans in his spacious apartment. See him sitting in a chair, others in chairs or on the sofa

listening to him with rapt attention. That ministry in Haldane's temporary home was the beginning of a great spiritual awakening, not only in Geneva but in France and Switzerland. English speaking Christians speak of the 18th century *Great Awakening*. French Christians think of the 19th century *Réveil*, French for "revival" that was begun in the living room of Haldane's apartment in Geneva. His students included César Malan – instrumental in the conversion of John "Rabbi" Duncan and the one who told Charlotte Elliott to come to Jesus just as she was, a remark that led to Elliott later to compose her famous hymn "Just as I Am" – and Merle d'Aubigné, the great church historian. They found Christ in Robert Haldane's living room and then took their new found faith all over French-speaking Europe!

And so it has continued ever since. Our large Presbyterian Church in America congregation in Annapolis, Maryland had its beginnings in the home of a Naval Academy professor who invited cadets to his home on Sundays and weekday evenings to evangelize the unsaved and to disciple the Christians. Charles Colson would invite friends to dinner in his home and show them Woody Allen's movie *Crimes and Misdemeanors* as a way of starting a conversation about the meaning of life.

And, of course, all along there was all manner of other ministry that Christians extended to others in their homes. Think of John and Polly Newton caring so long for William Cowper, the great poet and hymn-writer, who struggled for years with what we nowadays would call clinical depression.

Certainly one reason why Paul and the rest of the Bible required Christians to marry only *in the Lord* was that only when husbands and wives shared a commitment to Christ could their home be exploited for ministry. Mixed marriages severely hamper the usefulness of a Christian's home as a salt shaker. In the early church there was the famous case of Pomponia Graecina, the wife of the conqueror of Britain, Aulus Plautius. She was a Christian but her husband was not and she found her position high in Roman society an almost impossible challenge. She was expected to do certain things that a Christian could not do and she was prevented from doing most of what she would have loved to do as a Christian woman. Devoted as she was to what Tacitus, the Roman historian, referred to as her "foreign superstition," she used the murder of her cousin Julia to retire from public life and, under the cover of protracted mourning for Julia – her period of mourning eventually lasted forty years! – she retired from public life so that she would be placed less often in situations where her Christian faith would be compromised. She might otherwise had used her home to great effect, but it wasn't hers alone and Aulus Plautius was not a man likely to put a mosaic of Jesus in his impluvium! Young people take note. You want to marry someone with whom you can make your home a place of Christian ministry, someone with whom it will be natural to share such a ministry, someone who will both encourage and participate in the Christian use of your home. Find a young Aquila or Priscilla and marry him or her.

No conversation about Christ and salvation is as easy to begin and continue as that conversation begun in your dining room or living room. No kindness to others is easier to extend than the hospitality of your own home, where you are yourself so comfortable and where others are so easily put at ease. There should be for us Christians no sense of the fortress mentality that so many have about their homes: the place to which they retire, drawing up the drawbridge behind

them, a place to seek solace for themselves away from the world. I know that temptation all too well myself. I love to go home, to the quiet, to relax and be alone, and I can all too easily resent the intrusion of ministry. But I know very well, no matter my temptations to prefer isolation, Christian homes are not to be bunkers, or spas, or holiday houses; they are to be hospitals, and schools, and shelters, and sanctuaries to which others may repair for help of every kind, and they are to be lighthouses which point the way to those looking for eternal safety.

I suspect Priscilla and Aquila were delightful people. They must have been to be so highly thought of across the Mediterranean Christian world. And a large part of their popularity and a large measure of the gratitude of others for them was no doubt due to their willingness to open their home to others, to make it a center of gospel ministry and outreach. There were too many folk who owed them their lives, or, if not their lives, gratitude for help and encouragement given them in their home. Among them was Apollos who, no doubt, went to his grave remembering those evenings in Ephesus in their home and his excitement as he learned amazing things he had not known before!

Put the question to yourselves: how many of your neighbors, your workmates, your friends have been in your home and how often? And how intentionally are you using your home, as Aquila and Priscilla used theirs, to advance the gospel of Jesus Christ, to care for others in the Lord's name, and to bear witness to your faith? The possibilities are endless, Are you one of those people that's terrified about opening your mouth and saying something about Christ to someone who isn't a Christian? Well, hang something on your wall or build it into your floor so they can't miss it when they come to visit. Then they'll ask about it and the conversation will have begun! If only we are committed to making sure that our home is a place where Jesus Christ *is served!* An opportunity presented itself to Priscilla and Aquila and they made the most of it and the entire Christian world received the blessing!