

So God created man in his own image;
he created him in the image of God;
he created them male and female.

God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it. Rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and every creature that crawls on the earth.”ⁱ

Those words from the Bible’s first chapter make it plain that God intended his purposes to be fulfilled by a community of human beings working side by side for the same cause. Likewise, the last chapter of the Bible says:

The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. . . . and they will reign forever and ever.ⁱⁱ

Just as it was in Creation, so it shall be in the New Creation: God ordains that the earth will be ruled by a body of humans working side by side for the same cause.

It seems then that, in-between Creation and New Creation, we would see the same: the Lord’s purposes being fulfilled as human beings who are striving side by side for the same cause. In our marching orders, the Messiah calls his people to labor side by side for the same cause—making disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Triune God, and teaching them to obey him.

In our passage, Luke develops the biblical theme of collaboration. Missionary work, church-planting work, and existing-church work are never one-person assignments. They all require teamwork. So, let’s move through this passage noticing how believers work together and help each other to fulfill the Great Commission.

In verses 18-23, Paul sets sail for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Before they set sail, Paul shaved his head because of a vow (possibly in response to the Lord’s promise of protection in Corinth). They dock in Ephesus, where Paul spends his time debating in the synagogue. The Jews are apparently interested in what he says, as they ask him to stay longer. But Paul is set on returning to Jerusalem, and leaves behind his friends to continue the ministry.

When Paul lands in Caesarea, he greets the Jerusalem church before visiting the Antioch church. By now, Paul has enemies who are stirring up concern about his ministry. He’s likely shoring up partnership with these key congregations, ensuring their support for his work. Then Paul visits churches he’d planted in the regions of Galatia and Phrygia, “strengthening all the disciples.”

What have you noticed so far in terms of believers collaborating to fulfill the Great Commission? We saw Paul bringing Priscilla and Aquilla with him and then leaving them behind to spread the gospel in Ephesus. Paul visits the churches in Jerusalem and Antioch, likely asking them to help him in his work. Then he visited churches he’d planted to strengthen them.

Notice the two-direction nature of collaboration—it consists of both *giving* and *receiving* help. This reminds us that we should ask for help from other believers and churches, and also help other believers and churches.

Let’s think about Paul’s taking Priscilla and Aquilla away from Corinth and leaving them in Ephesus. They are mature, godly saints, beneficial to the church. But they had to go out from one congregation to help another. Are we ready and willing to send mature and helpful members to fulfill the Great Commission elsewhere?

In his letters, Paul regularly sends for and sends out useful ministry partners as need arises. When such occasion arises in our church—as it has before and will again—will we be happy to send coworkers away? Are we willing to send gifted members to seminary or the mission field (whether Nepal or Nevada)? And when they go, will we say, “Take with you any GABC members that would be useful”? We’re not in competition, nor are we hoarding disciples. We’re co-workers in the same cause. If God brought us gifted people or developed them within us, can’t we trust him to do it again? A church that won’t share its people is a church that has little faith in God.

In verses 24-28, we meet a Jew named Apollos, recently arrived in Ephesus. He's a native of Alexandria—the most educated city in the Greco-Roman world. He's eloquent (trained in rhetoric), competent in the Scriptures (the Old Testament), and fervent in spirit (passionate and Spirit-filled). He teaches "accurately about Jesus" in the synagogue with boldness. He is boldly, passionately, eloquently, skillfully, accurately declaring the gospel to the Jews, proving from the Hebrew Scriptures that Jesus is the Messiah. In short, Apollos is a believer in Jesus and a phenomenal preacher.

Apollos, however, is lacking in one area—his theology of baptism. "He knew only John's baptism." John the Baptist baptized people for repentance, calling them to believe in the coming Messiah (Jesus). Apollos had come to believe in Jesus. It's unclear what it means that "he knew only John's baptism." It may mean that he still taught baptism as a sign of preparation for the Messiah instead of a sign of entrance into him. Or, perhaps, understanding John's baptism as preparation for the Messiah's arrival, he no longer baptized converts (since Jesus had arrived). Whatever the case, what do we see here? As spiritually gifted, exegetically brilliant, and theologically accurate as he may be, Apollos needs help. Note that: No matter how mature, educated, and gifted we may be, we are never beyond correction.

A preacher such as Apollos might be intimidating to many. It would be tempting to say, "There's no way I could convince him of anything!" and just walk away knowing he's wrong but being unwilling to show him. It might be tempting to smugly pat yourself on the back about how right you are and how wrong he is. But that's not Priscilla or Aquilla—they loved Jesus—and *Apollos*! So, instead of causing a scene or slipping out quietly, they took him aside. In a setting and place conducive to conversation and free from embarrassment, "they explained the way of God to him more clearly."

What do we do upon encountering another believer's error? Is it an opportunity to commend ourselves, or to show compassion? Do our hearts fill with compassion and desire to help them? And when we do help, is it a "gotcha" moment, a passive-aggressive note, an attack, a shaming, a display of our rightness? Or do we arrange a time and place that we can avoid embarrassment and give opportunity for dialogue and understanding? Are we willing to correct each other and to do it well?

They didn't discourage Apollos to the point of depression or resignation. Nor did Apollos resist or pout because someone disagreed with him. He wasn't too proud a man to have a woman correct him (and then admit she was right!). He accepted their help and corrected his doctrine and practice.

What resulted from this help humbly offered and humbly received? Apollos is sent with commendation to the church in Achaia. And, "after he arrived, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed. For he vigorously refuted the Jews in public, demonstrating through the Scriptures that Jesus is the Messiah." Believers offered help, a believer accepted help, and that partnership resulted in him being a great help to other believers. That is gospel-cooperation.

Notice Luke's phrasing: "he was a great help to those who by grace had believed." The sovereign grace of God gave them faith. Yet, God's grace came by means of God's people. That's how God's grace continues to come to us—through the humble ministry of other believers.

In Acts 19:1-7, time has passed. Apollos is in Corinth. Paul's returned to Ephesus by an out-of-the-way and challenging route, inconveniencing himself in order to strengthen churches. In Ephesus, Paul "found some disciples" and asked, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" "When you believed" doesn't indicate the status of genuine believers; it's Paul's beginning assumption. He approached them as though they were believers (with apparent concern). When they reply, "We haven't even heard that there is a Holy Spirit," he learns they aren't believers.

When asked what they were baptized into, they said "into John's baptism." So Paul clarified that "John baptized with a baptism of repentance, telling the people that they should believe in the one who would come after him, that is, in Jesus."ⁱⁱⁱ That's the difference between Apollos and them: Apollos had believed in Jesus the Messiah and received the Holy Spirit. They had not. So, when Paul share the gospel, they believe, he baptizes them, they receive the Holy Spirit and exercise spiritual gifts.

We must admire how Paul handled this. Thought suspicious, he didn't write them off or declare they weren't saved. He patiently, graciously engaged them to help them understand the gospel. As a result, a dozen men were saved.

In verses 8-10, we find Paul boldly declaring the kingdom of God in the synagogue. But some hard-hearted Jews began to slander the gospel in public. So, following Jesus' teaching, Paul wiped the dust off his feet and left with those who had believed. But he didn't stop preaching. "He conducted discussions every day in the lecture hall of Tyrannus." This refers either to a hall owned by Tyrannus or a hall where he was the primary lecturer. Either way, Paul rented or used it for evangelism.

In that day, people woke early to work when it was cool. They stopped at 11 am to rest before resuming work at 4 pm. This means Paul made tents all morning. Then, when others were resting and the hall was free, he went to work discussing the gospel. Since everyone else was free, they could rest in the hall and listen to him. Then Paul would go back to work making tents after five hours of evangelism. Paul did that every day for two years—over 3,600 hours of teaching. Since all the roads in Asia met in Ephesus (and everyone visited on occasion), "all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord."

Throughout Acts, we find Paul sacrificing himself—comfort, status, wealth, time—for the sake of the gospel. We see that also in Priscilla, Aquilla, and Apollos. None competes with the others. They're co-workers, willing to lay aside their rights to serve the Lord, each other, the church, and the world for the gospel.

Where does such a sacrificial, service-oriented mindset come from? It comes from from knowing and loving Jesus Christ. In Philippians 2, Paul writes:

Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus,
who, existing in the form of God,
did not consider equality with God
as something to be exploited.
Instead he emptied himself
by assuming the form of a servant,
taking on the likeness of humanity.
And when he had come as a man,
he humbled himself by becoming obedient
to the point of death—
even to death on a cross.

Jesus didn't exploit his equality with God. He voluntarily humbled himself, becoming a suffering servant to save us by dying for our sins.

When we adopt the mind of Christ, we refuse to exploit privilege and strength to serve ourselves. When we experience encouragement in Christ, the consolation of God's love, and fellowship with the Spirit, we become people who are, in Paul's words: "thinking the same way, having the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose." We are co-workers who "do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than [themselves]. Everyone should look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others."^{iv}

ⁱ Ge 1:27–28.

ⁱⁱ Re 22:3–5.

ⁱⁱⁱ Acts 19:4

^{iv} Philippians 2:2–4