

The Blind-spot of Apollos & Chinese Christian Missions

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INTRODUCTION

Apollos was a Jewish scholar from the outstanding cultural center of Alexandria. He knew the Scriptures well, taught about Jesus accurately and preached the Word passionately and publicly. However, his knowledge of baptism was found to be deficient, limited to the baptism of John. This inadequate understanding (hereafter as “Apollos’ blind spot”) hindered his ministry. Later, it was corrected by the personal coaching of Priscilla and Aquila who was a “lay-couple,” refugees from Rome.

AC 18:24 Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. ²⁵ He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. ²⁶ He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately. (NIV and hereafter)

THE “APOLLOS’S BLIND SPOT” & CHINESE CHRISTIAN MISSIONS

Some Chinese Christians’ understanding of Christian missions, like “Apollos’ blind spot,” may have certain deficiency. In this paper, only five possible problems of some Chinese Christians are selectively identified and briefly discussed related to the understanding and practice of Christian missions.

1. The primary focus of “the model public prayer” (Mt 6:9-15, generally known as “the Lord’s prayer”)

Christian mission is found to be the primary focus of “the model public prayer” taught by Jesus and recorded in Mt 6:9-15. The entire chapter of John 17 is “the Lord’s prayer” in which Jesus prayed to the Father in intimate and endearing way. Some Bible scholars identify it as “the priestly prayer” of Jesus preceding His crucifixion, interceding before the Father for his disciples then and Christians now. However, the passage of Mt 6:9-15 is an integral part of Jesus’ instruction on prayer prompted by the request of the disciples who wanted to be taught as John the Baptist did for his disciples, Lk 11:1-4. This “model public prayer” (Wan 1998:215-217) is in contrast-distinction from private personal prayer of 6:6, hypocritical public prayer of 6:5, repetitive meaningless prayer of 6:7. Thus the passage may be called “the prayer instructed by the Lord” (not “the Lord’s prayer”) or more appropriately named “the model public prayer (as taught by the Lord).”

This correct understanding of “the model public prayer” has strong practical implications for Christian’s corporate identity and unity (“our Father in heaven” – brotherhood of God’s children), worshipful attitude (“hallowed be your name” – holiness in character and desiring the lost likewise). Instead of the usual practice of “shopping list” approach in prayer (as if God were the Santa Claus), God’s sovereignty and reign should be the focus (“your kingdom come”), the Christian’s submission and

eschatological preoccupation should be the priority (“your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”).

The primary focus of this “model public prayer” is Christian mission as seen in the three-fold desire for God’s name, kingdom and will, preceding the three-fold request for daily bread, forgiveness, and deliverance. As Jesus later elaborated (6:25-34), Christian’s prayer should not be self-centered preoccupation of man’s wants but God-honoring kingdom-orientation of mission. The best way to remove this “blind spot” on “model public prayer” is the positive teaching on the three-fold desire which is clearly a mission-orientation.

2. “the Macedonia Call” (Acts 16:6-10)

Acts 16:6-10 is generally being referred to as “the Macedonia call” whereby Christians are to be called to mission service and challenged to be involved in missions. A closer examination will show that this is a misunderstanding of the meaning of the text.

AC 16:6 Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. ⁷ When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. ⁸ So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. ⁹ During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” ¹⁰ After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

The event of Acts 16:6-10 occurred when Paul and Silas (15:40-16:5) were in their second missionary journey. They were already actively involved in missions with strategy of their own. However, God had other plan for them. Instead of their desire to go north and then turn eastward (from Mysia to Bithynia), they were given ministry guidance to go north and then turn westward (from Mysia to Philippi) by vision (*Acts 16:9*).

Therefore, it is wrong to quote this passage and use the event to issue a “missionary call” to Christians for foreign mission service whereas the text reports the leading of the Holy Spirit intervening the itinerary evangelists’ plan and supplanting missionary strategy with divine guidance.

Besides, the “success syndrome” of contemporary Christian (being secularized by the trendy management-orientation and saturated by Chinese pragmatism) also leads to the Chinese Christian’s conviction that if they follow God’s guidance in missions, certainly it would lead to immediate and definite ministry success and fruitful prosperity. That is not the case in Acts 16.

When they followed closely the divine intervention of “the Macedonia call,” they had only one lady convert – Lydia (16:13-15), later they were even stripped, beaten and imprisoned (16:22-23).

3. “Believe...you and your household...” (Acts 16:31)

AC 16:31 They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved--you and your household." ³² Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. ³³ At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. ³⁴ The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God--he and his whole family.

In Acts 16:31, the NIV is very clear that the jailer was told by the apostle Paul that he was to believe and be saved—the same applied to his household. However, the Chinese Union translation of 1911 is misleading. Its rendition gives the reader the impression that the jailer was told to believe; then his household would be saved. Added to the problem of ambiguous Chinese translation was the Chinese cultural background.

For centuries Chinese imperial government recruited officials by the “civil examination” system. Anyone excelled in the “civil examination” at various levels (village, county, province, palace) would enter the hierarchical officialdom bringing family members along. In other words, “success is relative” meaning family members and relatives shared the honor, glory and reward with the individual achiever.

This would explain why Chinese Christians are prompt to read into the text of Acts 16:31 that a believing individual could automatically benefit the whole household with salvation, especially when the Chinese translation is ambiguously misleading. The assumption is that entering heaven is like immigrating to the U.S. and Canada. When a member being holder of a “green card” (permanent residence) or passport applied on ground of family reunion, other members will join them in the other side of the ocean.

4. “for the sake of my kinsmen” (Ro 9:1-3)

It has been a customary practice of Chinese Christian to cite Ro 9:1-3 in order to incite the Chinese kinsman-spirit to evangelize the massive number of non-believing Chinese. The motive is not in suspicion and the passion is not in question. The pragmatic orientation is clear, the goal is noble and the concern for ministry efficiency is notable. The problem lies with the wrong use of this passage to motivate Chinese Christians to evangelize their non-Christian kinsmen.

The apostle Paul’s sense of compulsion to evangelize the Jews of his time is not merely a matter of “kinsman spirit” as in the case of Chinese Christians’ to evangelize their own. Paul’s passion for the conversion of his kinsmen of Acts 9:1-3 cannot (and should not) be carelessly equated with Chinese Christians’ zeal for non-Christian Chinese.

Paul’s understanding and conviction regarding the primacy of evangelizing the Jews can be summarized as follows: (see Wan 1998:248-250; 1999:74-75)

- the Jews were God’s chosen people (Ro 9-11);
- the plan of salvation and the Messiah came from the Jews (Ro 4; Ep 2);

- Christ's example and instruction: to the Jews first as recorded in the Gospel books and Acts 1:8;
- Paul's theological conviction and missionary practice (Ro 1:16; 2:9-10; Acts 9:29-31; 13:5; 14:1; 17:1-2; 18:4-6; 19:8-10; etc.) to the Jews first and then gentiles.

. To the apostle Paul, there are theological and missiological reasons behind his statement in Ro 9:1-3; whereas the Chinese Christian applying the same text to evangelizing non-believing Chinese may have cultural, emotional, ethnic and/or pragmatic factors only.

5. The “tentmakers” (Acts 18:1-4)

It is now trendy for Christians to stay in their own professions and be involved in mission ministry for a long period of time (i.e. different from short-term missions). This type of mission service is called “tentmaking” and the apostle Paul is cited to be the precedence and Acts 18:1-4 as the biblical evidence.

This new approach of “tentmaking” as a mission strategy is undoubtedly innovative in gaining access to “closed country.” The extensive involvement of many “lay people” in mission due to the popularity of “tentmaking” is unquestionably encouraging. Many more advantages may be added.

However, it is wrong to use the passage of Acts 18:1-4 as a biblical principle and the temporary life style of the apostle Paul working with Aquila and Priscilla as a biblical precedence to support the mission practice of “tentmaking.” Let us look at the text carefully:

AC 18:1 After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ² There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, ³ and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. ⁴ Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.

The apostle Paul arrived Corinth with no financial backing so he supported himself by joining Aquila and Priscilla, doing tentmaking for about a year (1Cor 9: 1-19). The refugee couple from Italy were tentmakers by profession. Paul was an itinerant evangelist engaging in temporary manual labor of making tent merely out of necessity during his third missionary journey. This was an occasional practice recorded in the Bible but not a principle prescribed in the Bible. Building a mission strategy out of Paul's occasional practice with no other biblical references than Acts 18:1-4 is a dangerous undertaking. It is just questionable like using MK 16:18 as a biblical principle combined with Paul's experience in Malta island (Acts 28:1-6) as biblical precedence to formulate “snake handling” as a missionary model. It is bad missiology based on bad hermeneutics.

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CONCLUSION

Apollos' deficient understanding of baptism hindered his ministry. Similarly, some Chinese Christians' "Apollos' blind spot" have ill-effects on their Christian understanding and missionary practice. Five aspects have been selectively identified and briefly discussed in this paper to correct possible problems related to the misunderstanding of the Bible, misinformed Christian teaching, and misusing biblical passages to support certain Christian practices and mission ministries.

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