

Text: Ac 19.1-5

We come to the beginning of three years of ministry in Ephesus for the apostle Paul. The year is about AD 53.

The opening scene of Paul's ministry in Ephesus involves a unique experience, one that has some parallels with other events in Acts, but also unique differences.

Paul meets a group of men, called disciples, who don't have the Holy Spirit. It turns out there are crucial matters of which they are ignorant. In fact, they are probably not Christians at all. They are religious, but not believers.

Let's read our passage:

Acts 19.1-7, our text is vv. 1-5

The story poses some questions to us. Some of the questions are unanswerable.

- Why did Aquila and Priscilla make no impression on these men as they had on Apollos?
- Why hadn't the story of Apollos caused some impression on them?

We can't answer those questions — God didn't give us enough information.

Other questions rise, which Bible scholars make attempts to answer, based on other passages in the Bible.

- These men are disciples, it says. Disciples of whom? Jesus or John?
- When Paul asks if they received the Holy Spirit when they believed, does he mean when they became Christians?
- What prompts Paul's question about baptism? Were they in the company of the young Ephesian church based on their previous baptism?

We can't answer these questions dogmatically, but they do get at the confusion Paul uncovers as he deals with these men.

Sometimes in the church today, we have people who come across as Christians. They know a lot about the Bible, they are friendly, modest, religious, and join in the fellowship. But something is off. They aren't disciples of Jesus Christ. They are confused in their thinking. They have some of the forms of Christianity, but not the heart of it.

I've given our message this title:

No Half-way Houses to Christianity

You shouldn't think that you can be religious and carry on a connection with Christianity of some kind and that's all you need to do. You especially shouldn't think that some kind of previous baptism experience makes you a Christian.

Proposition: The faith that pleases God has the proper object and receives proper confirmation.

I. Probing questions on first encounter (1-3)

A. Something is off

1. Who were these men?

a. Called disciples

1) The word starts a debate

a) Some say Christians (F. F. Bruce, Toussaint)

b) Some say not Christians (Witherington, Marshall, Constable, maybe Bock)

2) Usage of term

a) Normally in NT refers to Christians

b) Sometimes used of John's followers (e.g. Lk 5.33, 7.18f.)

b. They clearly were religious: disciples of someone

1) Most likely they led moral lives

2) Probably Jewish men, devout speech (affected by John's teaching)

2. How did Paul meet these men?

a. Paul "found" these disciples

1) The word doesn't tell us much

2) Yet they seem distinct from Apollos, somehow not in contact with him

3) Also distinct from Aquilla/Priscilla

They were devout Jews who somehow met Paul as he arrives in Ephesus.

b. As Paul spoke with them, their testimony somehow unclear

1) Perhaps they sounded like believers in Christ to start with

2) Yet as Paul talked with them, something missing, hence his questions

B. The missing Holy Spirit

1. The assumed reality of Paul's question: "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?"

a. Assumes "belief" — *i.e.* a Christian testimony

b. Probing question: did you receive the Holy Spirit

Some think Paul's question proves they are believers.

2. The answer is problematic: "never heard of HS"

a. They were Jews, trained by John the Baptist

1) The OT spoke of God's spirit, sometimes calling him the Holy Spirit (though revelation not so clear as NT)

2) John the Baptist spoke specifically about one who would "baptize with the Holy Spirit"

3) Thus, very likely they know of the Holy Spirit

b. More likely, they have no concept of the indwelling HS

1) "Did you receive..." — implies some kind of spiritual experience ("believed")

2) But probes the nature of their experience

The text doesn't tell us, but something was not right about what Paul was hearing from these men. They said some true things, but... something was missing: the Holy Spirit.

This gives Paul a clue for his next question

C. The unbaptism baptism

1. Implication of question two: “Into what then were you baptized?”
 - a. They must have mentioned baptism
 - b. Perhaps they started talking about this
 - c. Paul soon realized: they mean something different
2. Their answer: John’s baptism
 - a. Their baptism was sincere
 - b. Their baptism was religious
 - c. But not Christian

At this point, Paul puts it together. They don’t have Christ. They have religion, but not Christ.

Baptism by itself doesn’t produce salvation, it just gets you wet — it is an “unbaptism” baptism.

People in our day often recall a baptism as a ritual they experienced (either as a baby or later).

Baptism without faith in Christ and subsequent HS is an “unbaptism” baptism.

II. Pressing claims needed for true profession (4)

A. Acknowledging the value of John’s baptism

1. John’s baptism is different from Christian baptism
2. Nevertheless, Paul commends John’s baptism for two reasons
 - a. Characterized by repentance “of repentance”

“a descriptive gen. μετανοίας (gen. sg. fem. of μετάνοια, -ας, ἡ, ‘repentance’).”¹

¹ L. Scott Kellum, *Acts*, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Robert W. Yarbrough, *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2020), 217.

“marked by (case of species or genus), not as conveying, repentance”²

b. Exhorting to an obligation: “telling... to believe”

“The conj. ἵνα indicates indir. speech, so the subjunc. that follows (πιστεύσωσιν, 3rd pl. aor. act. subjunc. of πιστεύω) takes an ‘ought to’ sense, ‘they should believe.’”³

Mk 1.4 John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Lk 3.15-16 ¶ Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Christ,¹⁶ John answered and said to them all, “As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

B. Explaining the point of John’s baptism

1. For the “disciple of John” to have a legitimate baptism
 - a. Must include repentance of sin (acknowledgement of sinfulness, inability to save self)
 - b. Must depend on “one coming, mightier than John”
2. The record (silent) of those who knew John, knew Christ, and were never “re-baptized” as far as we know
 - a. Apollos (Ac 18.24-28)
 - b. The twelve apostles (note, Paul was baptized Acts 9.18)
 - c. The 120 in the upper room at Pentecost
 - d. Jesus himself, though, of course he is different

² A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Ac 19.4.

³ Kellum, *Acts*, 217.

3. The point of John's baptism
 - a. If one saw in it the confession of sin (baptism of repentance)
 - b. And if one hoped in the One who would come
 - c. Then John's baptism stood in place as Christian baptism
4. The clincher: "that is, in Jesus"
 - a. The implication is that these men did not know Jesus
 - b. But another implication is that if they truly want to follow John, they must believe in Jesus

"The real deficiency of these twelve or so was not their baptism. It was much more serious. They failed to recognize Jesus as the one whom John had proclaimed, as the promised Messiah."⁴

III. Prompt response to the gospel message (5)

- A. Immediately, these twelve men (7) submitted to a second baptism
 1. Confessing deficiency of previous religion
 2. Confessing truth of the gospel

"Unlike Apollos, who had already been instructed in 'the way' and who accurately taught about Jesus, this group was totally unacquainted with the gospel. They knew only John's preparatory message. But John had prepared them well, and they immediately responded to Paul's good news that Christ the Messiah had come; they were baptized in his name (v. 5)."⁵

- B. Naming the name of Christ
 1. Christian baptism confesses Christ as Saviour

⁴ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 399.

⁵ Polhill, 399–400.

2. Any baptism missing this component is deficient
 - a. Those baptized as infants cannot confess either
 - 1) Their sins and sinfulness
 - 2) Their submission to Christ
 - b. Those baptized by conscious choice for non-gospel motives
 - 1) Means of joining a church
 - 2) Meeting family expectations
 - 3) Or any other non-gospel motive

Conclusion:

Proposition: The faith that pleases God has the proper object and receives proper confirmation.

You see, Christian faith isn't just adopting a set of moral codes, a certain worldview, a lifestyle choice.

Christian faith is:

1. A confession: I am a sinner and I cannot save myself
2. A confession: Jesus is the Saviour and I cast myself on him

Baptism that contains these elements counts as Christian baptism: Apollos was not rebaptized, these twelve men were.

Both sets of men clearly pleased God with their proper Christian testimonies.