

First Sunday After the Epiphany
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
St. Francisville, LA
7 January 2018

Acts 9:1-7

I am in the mood for a little theology. I promise I will not become overly technical. So, please indulge me. Acts 19:1-7 presents the encounter between Paul and the disciples of John in Ephesus. After some conversation, Paul inquires about their Baptism and whether they had received the Holy Spirit, to which they respond, “We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” At this point, it became clear to Paul that these disciples had received the Baptism of preparation, but not Baptism into Christ. After some catechesis on the difference between John and Jesus, Paul baptized them and laid his hands upon them. These disciples began to prophesy and speak in tongues as the Holy Spirit descended upon them

This passage is used by many to justify Confirmation as a post-baptismal gifting of the Holy Spirit. The text is also used to justify the so-called “Believer’s Baptism” or “Baptism in the Holy Spirit.” These interpretations seem to have some validity if one is to accept a modern answer to the question, “Were these twelve men disciples?” For many centuries, the tradition of the Church maintained that these men, having being baptized only into John and not into Christ, were non Christians. Tertulian and John Chrysostom,¹ believe that since these men did not know of the Holy Spirit these men can not possibly be Christians. In this view then, what we have here is a comparison between two different baptisms: A pre-Christian and a Christian Baptism. Since these men were not yet Christians, this text is about baptism into Christ, which always results in the gifting of the Holy Spirit.²

Accepting this traditional view that these men were not Christians solves many obvious questions: If these folks were Christians, why did they not know about the Holy Spirit? Can any person be called a disciple of Christ without having received Baptism into Christ? Was John’s Baptism considered by some in New Testament times sufficient for acceptance into the Christian family? There are many such questions that can be raised, which the traditional view answers well. Obviously, if they are not Christians, it is entirely understandable that they have not heard about the coming of the Holy Spirit. It would be appropriate to deny them the title “disciples” as they have not been baptized into Christ. And, John’s Baptism remains a Baptism of repentance and not sufficient for inclusion into the Christian

¹ Tertullian, “Treaty 10.4: On Baptism.” <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0321.htm>> (9 December 2015); John Chrysostom, “Treaty 40: On Acts” <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/210103.htm>> (13 December 2015).

² In the case of Acts 10: 44-48 Cornelius receives the Holy Spirit while Peter is still preaching, a fact that leads Peter to baptize him and his household. “The leaping of the immense gap between Jew and Gentile called for a decisive, divine impulse. The use of tongues was such an undeniable demonstration that the Spirit had come and thus that the entire proceeding was the work of God. Nowhere else do we find the gift of the Spirit preceding baptism because this was a once in history event of the greatest moment.” Ash, Ibid, 88.

family. Seeing the text in this way, answers all these questions and makes the passage clear. Unfortunately, this may be the wrong reading.

A modern reading of the text believes that these men were in fact Christians. The problem with the passage rests on the word **μαθητάς**. Acts 19:1 tells us that as Paul came to Ephesus, he found some **disciples**. Paul then seems to assume that they are **πιστεύσαντες** or **believers**. In 19:2 Paul asks them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” Paul assumes they are Christians and the immediate context of Acts 19:1-7 also assumes they are. In Acts, the word **μαθητάς** means Christian and not just disciple or learner in a general way. In fact, of the 28 times the word **μαθητάς** appears in Acts, 27 times it means “disciple” or “Christian” clearly and without a doubt. The only exception, where there could be a question about the word, is in our passage.

The disciples of 19:1 are most likely Christians who nonetheless had not been baptized in the name of Jesus and who had no awareness of the Holy Spirit. For full inclusion into the Christian family, the disciples of John needed to receive the Holy Spirit, the very presence of the risen Christ in the Church. For Acts, no one can consider himself a Christian without having first received the Holy Spirit. “The time of the church is essentially the time of the Spirit of God. Church and Spirit belong to each other inseparably as body and soul.”³ For Acts, the main hero in the story of the early New Testament communities is not Peter or Paul, but the Spirit.

It is very likely that some disciples of John were followers of Christ who had heard the message of Jesus and who had even preached Jesus as Messiah. Acts 18:25, for example, tells us that Apollos had been instructed, “On the ways of the Lord” and preached with passion the things concerning Jesus. Yet, Apollos, only knew the Baptism of John. It is possible then that these disciples are, “A group of incomplete Christians, but Christians none the less.”⁴ These disciples have no awareness of the Spirit and seemed to have an inadequate faith that needs to be corrected.⁵ This would explain the need for Paul’s teaching on the difference between the Baptism of John and Christian Baptism.

What do we make then of Paul’s imposition of hands? Does it set a pattern for the so-called Baptism in the Holy Spirit as Dunn and others believe? Is it the forerunner of Confirmation as some sacramentalists believe? I believe it would be inappropriate to assume either. We can say with certainty that in at least three cases Luke steps out of his normal pattern, where the Holy Spirit gifting takes place at the time of Baptism: Acts 8:14-17, Acts 10: 44-48, and Acts 19:1-7. These three special circumstance cases are prefigured or preceded by the extraordinary events of Acts 2. These significant events all include the expansion of the gospel from

³ Robert Kock, “Spirit,” in *Sabbath to Wrath*, (vol. 3 of *Sacramentum Verbi: An Encyclopedia of Biblical Theology*, ed. Johannes B. Bauer; 3 vols.; New York, N. Y.: Herder and Herder, 1970), 883.

⁴ Norris, 97.

⁵ Robert C. Tennehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis, IN: Fortress, 1990), 231-234.

Jerusalem, to Samaria, to Judea, and to the ends of the world, which fits within Acts missional theology. In Acts 2 we are in Jerusalem, in Acts 8 we have moved to Samaria, in Acts 10 we are in Joppa (which is a port town in South West Israel in the province of Judea,) and, in Acts 19:1-7 we find ourselves within Gentile land, well outside Jewish territory.

I believe these passages are about the inclusion of the lost, which is central to the theology of Luke. The bringing into “the Way” of those who are outside of the way is of utmost concern for Luke. The inclusion of Gentiles into the Church was such an extraordinary event that it required an extraordinary action by God’s Holy Spirit. The acceptance of Christ as Messiah by the Samaritans was such an unexpected and extraordinary event that Peter and John saw the need to offer the new church the legitimacy and seal of approval they needed via apostolic visitation. The extraordinary reception of the Spirit by Cornelius and his household as Peter was preaching was so shocking and unexpected that Peter proceeds to baptize all of them into Christ. The inclusion of the disciples of John into the faith is of such importance to the future Church that God’s Holy Spirit burst into the scene and filled them with his power and joy.

I believe that even today the Holy Spirit remains an active and powerful force in the life of the believer, constantly re-energizing, re-regenerating, and re-gifting the Christian with the gifts needed to fulfill the promises we made at Baptism. The Spirit aids the believer to participate fully in Christ’s ministry as priest, prophet and king. This “further strengthening” adds a dynamic role to the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian. There are times in our lives when the Holy Spirit gifts us with special knowledge, power, or strength that makes it possible for us to live more fully into our baptismal covenant.

I love Paul’s question to these believers, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you first became a believer?” I believe what this question really means is “How has the Holy Spirit you received at Baptism changed your life? How is the Holy Spirit acting in your life today?” These are the real questions. As we celebrate our Lord’s baptism and reaffirm our own vows, we must ask ourselves, “How alive am I? How much do I let the Holy Spirit inspire and transform my life? How am I living into the baptismal promises I made at Baptism?” These are important questions. We must reclaim the excitement, the joy, and the hope of our baptism. We must be re-energized by God’s Spirit every day to do the works God has given us to do and to live the joyful life for which we were created.

Baptism reminds us of new life and joy. I pray you will reconnect with that joy today and I pray the Holy Spirit will zap you with the power you need to live the life God wants you to live. Amen!