

Acts 19:1-10, No 39
“Christian Experience”
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Now Paul arrives in Ephesus where he will remain for between two and three years, the longest period of residential ministry on any of his three missionary tours. And Luke begins with an interesting and somewhat odd report of the apostle’s encounter with some disciples of John the Baptist. John the Baptist, your remember, was executed by Herod a year or more before the crucifixion of Jesus.

Text Comment

- v.1 The reference to Apollos alerts us to the fact that it was during Paul’s year-long absence from Ephesus after his first shorter visit to the city that Apollos had come to Ephesus, met Priscilla and Aquila, conducted ministry in the city, and then departed for Achaia, all of which we learned in the preceding verses. Here we learn that his ministry in Achaia was, in fact, as we learn in 1 Corinthians, conducted specifically in Corinth, the capital of the province, not, for example, in Athens.

Ephesus was the fourth largest city in the empire and so fit with Paul’s plan to establish churches in the principal cities. Its temple to Artemis was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens and decorated with the works of the finest painters and sculptors of the ages. [Peterson, 529]

- v.2 There is a longstanding debate about the proper translation of these disciples’ reply to Paul. The ESV reads, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit,” which may well be right. It is favored by many commentators. [cf. Peterson, 529-530] On the other hand, as disciples of John the Baptist, who, you remember, predicted the coming of the Holy Spirit, and, presumably, as men acquainted with the Old Testament, which includes references to the Holy Spirit, they would likely have not said that they had no knowledge whatsoever of this Holy Spirit. That has led some to suggest that what they meant was that they hadn’t heard that the Holy Spirit *had yet been given*, that is, they knew he was coming because John had prophesied his coming, but that hadn’t heard that he had come. [Stott, 304; cf. Bruce] In any case, they knew a lot less about Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit than Apollos had.

That they are referred to as disciples and believers certainly suggests they were righteous men, even if they were not yet *Christians* in the literal sense. Think of righteous and believing people such Zechariah and Elizabeth or Mary and Joseph as they were before the coming of the Lord. The fact that these men so willingly received Christian baptism is some indication of the faithful condition of their hearts.

Paul’s question, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” may suggest that there was something about their conduct that made Paul think to ask the question.

- v.6 We have here what has been called a “mini-Pentecost” or, perhaps better, what happened was that Pentecost “caught up with them.” [Stott in Peterson, 532]
- v.7 The interesting detail suggests that these men represented a small community of people, together with their wives and children, who had lived for some time in this netherworld, as it were, between the Old Testament and the New.
- v.9 The Western text of the book of Acts – not thought to be authentic but sometimes containing information that may be historical – adds the detail that Paul lectured daily from 11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. That makes sense since that was the time of the siesta, when Tyrannus himself, who would conduct his lectures in the cool of the morning, would be happy to rent out his hall to another teacher. There would have been more people awake in Ephesus at 1:00 a.m. than there would have been at 1:00 p.m! In any case, Paul must have been a riveting lecturer to keep people awake through the hours they would ordinarily have been napping.
- v.10 From Paul’s ministry, carried by his assistants and his converts, the gospel radiated outward through the province, reaching, for example, the cities of Colossae and Laodicea during this time.

We have talked around this question from time to time as we have made our way through Acts, but it is time to face it head-on since it is one of the issues in modern evangelical church life that reading the book of Acts constantly brings to the surface. As you may know, this text serves in some Christians circles as a proof-text for what is variously referred to as the baptism of the Holy Spirit, or the second blessing, or the sealing of or the filling with the Holy Spirit. There have been a number of Christians throughout the ages who have thought that what we find several times in Acts, at Pentecost but here as well, is what we are to understand as the pattern of Christian experience. Indeed the book of Acts is the principle demonstration of that teaching. That is, it is argued, the Christian life progresses in two separate and distinct phases separated by a distinct work of the Holy Spirit subsequent to a person’s becoming a Christian for the first time.

You can see easily enough why Acts 19 plays a role in these arguments. These men Paul encountered in Ephesus were already believers, the text says they were. They were already disciples, they are so described in v. 1. But subsequent to their becoming believers they were granted this effusion of the Holy Spirit. This is taken to be not simply a piece of history, but of meta-history, establishing a pattern for what is to follow in Christian experience.

We associate such views with Pentecostals and charismatics – who associate the second, distinct work of the Holy Spirit in a Christian’s life with the gift of tongues or prophecy mentioned here –, but they are hardly the only ones who have taught such a two stage Christian life. The general idea comes in a wide variety of forms and has been taught by some great figures of church history. The idea is as old as Montanism, a Christian movement of the 2nd and 3rd centuries whose most prominent member was the lay theologian Tertullian, the man who coined the term “Trinity” that all Christians have used ever since in referring to God.

But a similar concept can be detected in John Wesley's teaching of entire sanctification and sinless perfection, in the American evangelist Charles Finney's view of "entire sanctification," in the Higher Life movements associated with the famous Keswick Convention in England (think of A.B. Simpson or Hannah Whitehall Smith), and so on.

It is obviously an intra-mural debate, a debate among real Christians. Some exceptional Christians have held such views. A Puritan such as Thomas Goodwin is among them as is a hero of contemporary Reformed Christians, the London preacher of the mid-20th century, Martyn Lloyd-Jones. All of them, in one way or another, taught that at some point in a Christian's life may come, should come an experience of the Holy Spirit, his presence and his power, that raises the Christian to a higher level of perception, spiritual power, joy, assurance, peace, love, and fruitfulness in service. They may disagree among themselves about many things, but, in general, they agree that the ideal Christian life is produced not by one event but by two, not by conversion and its aftermath alone, but by a second, distinct visitation of the Holy Spirit. Characteristic of all these views, accordingly, is that there are a great many Christians, perhaps most of them at any time, who are living on a lower level, who still await this greater thing that the Holy Spirit must give them. Lest we imagine that this issue is of no practical importance to us, let me remind you that, according to almost all of this teaching, I remain on that lower level of the Christian life and so do most of you. Are we missing something of terrific importance? Are we groveling as Christians when we might be riding on the heights of the land? Should we be pleading with God for the second blessing? That is surely a question of immediate significance!

However, it will not surprise you to learn that I am not persuaded by such teaching and that for several reasons.

1) First, just as there are few able commentators on the book of Acts who consider this text we have read this morning to teach a two-stage view of the Christian life, so there are very few Christian theologians of note who, surveying the entire Bible, find it to teach such a view of the Christian life, a life in two stages or phases. They could all be wrong, to be sure, but the burden of proof surely rests heavily on the one who claims that they are.

One of the burdens the second blessing must bear is that if it is true most of the heroes of our faith, its holiest saints, and its most useful servants did not have such a second blessing, for they never claimed to have been elevated from one level of Christian experience to another.

What is more, many of those who have claimed to have had that second blessing and to have entered the higher stage of Christian living failed to convince other Christians that theirs had actually become a greater godliness or a deeper faith. John Wesley was furious with George Whitefield for pointing out that some of Wesley's followers who claimed to have attained sinless perfection seemed very obviously not to have done so. They were like the man Spurgeon knew who had claimed to attained sinless perfection by a second work of grace. Then someone stepped on his toe and his sinless perfection vanished like the morning dew! Even Paul, apparently, never reached this second stage because, as he so honestly reports in Romans 7, even as a mature Christian he was always struggling with his sins and too often unsuccessfully.

2) Second, it is a mistake to make a law out of an incident. Are we really being taught here in Acts 19 that what happened to these men, unusual as their situation was, is normative for all Christians everywhere and always? At this moment in Christian history it was possible to encounter a man like Apollos, who knew some things about Jesus and the gospel but not others, or these twelve men who knew only of the ministry of John the Baptist and, apparently, had not heard anything of the ministry of Jesus, whose coming John had prophesied. But before much longer there would have been no such people anywhere; no remaining disciples of John the Baptist who had never heard of Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit. These men and their experience represent a unique situation, unrepeated and unrepeatable in subsequent Christian history.

Of course we read of many things in Acts that are clearly taught us because they represent the pattern of Christian life and ministry as it ought always to be. I have reminded you again and again that Luke is giving us representative facts so that we can understand who and what a Christian is, what a Christian church is supposed to be and do. But we also read of many things in Acts that belong to the period when the foundation was being laid and would not occur regularly in subsequent Christian experience. We do not expect people who cheat on their tithe to drop dead as Ananias and Sapphira did, or Christian preachers to be released from prison by an angel, as Peter was, or people being miraculously healed simply by touching a handkerchief or apron that had touched the skin of Paul, as we will read happened in Ephesus later in this same 19th chapter. Most Christians through the ages, including the best of the best, never spoke in tongues or prophesied. Indeed, it is at least a real question whether *any* Christian since apostolic times has spoken in tongues or prophesied in the sense in which those terms are used in the New Testament.

The fact of the matter is that the relationship between Christian baptism and the demonstration of the Spirit's presence is varied in Luke's history. Sometimes the signs of the Spirit's presence are given *at* baptism (2:38; 8:38-39; as they are here in 19:6); sometimes they appear *before* baptism (as in the case of the folk gathered in Cornelius' home, 10:47); and sometimes they appear *after* baptism (as in the case of the Samaritans, 8:15-16). Clearly no one could argue from these circumstances that these manifestations of the Spirit's presence – speaking in tongues and prophesying – indicate a second stage of the Christian life, since they frequently appear in Acts at the very moment a person is becoming a Christian, not some time later.

What is more, it is important to remember that these charismatic manifestations of the presence of the Spirit apparently occurred only from time to time. There are many conversions and baptisms in Acts without them (e.g. the Ethiopian eunuch, Lydia, and the Philippian jailer, Crispus in Corinth, and so on). Indeed, taking the account of Paul's ministry together, the impression is that most people converted under his ministry – think of the cities of Galatia, his evangelism in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and Corinth – never experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit by speaking in tongues or prophesying, either when they became Christians or subsequently. Indeed, Paul will later say in his first letter to the Corinthians that such gifts as tongues and prophesy were given only to some, while other gifts were given to others.

3) Third, while these manifestations occurred on several occasions – how many we simply do not know – *we are never taught* in the New Testament that they represent a pattern to be

reproduced in every Christian life. The critical point in the theory of the two-stage Christian life or the second blessing is left entirely unmentioned: viz. that it should be the universal expectation of every Christian. Every text used by advocates of these theories to prove that this is actually taught somewhere in the New Testament has been shown by responsible exegetes, and rather easily, to teach nothing of the kind.

For example, very few have followed the 17th century's Thomas Goodwin, great man that he was, or the 20th century's Lloyd-Jones, in their interpretation of Ephesians 1:13 – they maintained that the “sealing” of the Holy Spirit mentioned there is a second, distinct work of God's grace – because it is not difficult to demonstrate that such is not what Paul actually says. The text actually says that the sealing is not something the Holy Spirit does to us or for us but is the Holy Spirit himself, and he is given not at some time subsequent to our first faith in Christ but at the time we believed. In other words, every Christian has the sealing of the Holy Spirit, because every Christian *has* the Holy Spirit who is himself the seal of our eternal inheritance in Christ. There have been very few preachers of the Word of God better than Martyn Lloyd-Jones, but there are better interpreters of the Bible! In this case, Dr. Lloyd-Jones did not know Greek, he trained as a medical doctor, not as a theologian or biblical interpreter, and in his interpretation of Eph. 1:13 he made some elementary mistakes of Greek grammar.

The whole passage in Ephesians 1 is dominated by the statement in v. 3: “God has blessed us in Christ *with every spiritual blessing...*” But in Lloyd-Jones' rendering of v. 13, only some have got *every* blessing and many lack a blessing that, in Lloyd-Jones' reading is vital to the church's health and progress and to the vitality of any particular Christian life. So we didn't get every blessing in Christ after all. [D. Macleod, *The Spirit of Promise*, 49-56]

Those kind of convincing responses to the arguments for a second distinct work of the Holy Spirit have been made in regard to every text typically appealed to by advocates of a two-stage Christian life.

4) Fourth, and finally, what is lacking, even in the historical reports of the demonstration of the Spirit's presence such as we have here, is any indication that what happened to these men had to do with a work of the Holy Spirit in them producing a greater, deeper, purer spiritual life. There is nothing here, or anywhere else, suggesting that this powerful experience of the Holy Spirit that produced speaking in tongues and prophesy made these men more devoted, greater lovers of God and others, more obedient to God's law, than those who don't have the second blessing. In all views of the second blessing or a two-stage Christian life, the second stage is a higher stage of Christian experience, the entrance into a deeper piety, deeper love, deeper joy, but there is nothing of this anywhere in Acts or anywhere else in the New Testament.

What happened to these men – the speaking in tongues and the prophesying – certainly served, as such things had served before, as a public and outward demonstration of the presence of the Holy Spirit and so the work and approval of God, but nothing is said or suggested about some new work of grace in the hearts of these men, some personal transformation that lifted them above what had been possible in some earlier stage of Christian experience. The New Testament *never* interprets these events in personal and subjective terms; not at Pentecost, not in Samaria, not at the home of Cornelius, and not here in Ephesus. The experience is never identified as a

permanent, transformative revolution in Christian experience or spiritual power. Paul would later write to the Corinthians, to a number of whom had received the power to speak foreign languages and had received the Spirit's gift of prophecy, but who were behaving very poorly, were bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ into reproach, and were in no way demonstrating that they were living in a higher realm of spiritual life. Indeed, we have no idea whether these men continued to speak in tongues or ever prophesied again. Frequently these gifts were given just once, as they had been to the elders' of Israel in Moses' day, to mark the frontiers and the new beginnings in the gospel's advance into the world.

But, if we are not going to use this passage to teach a two-stage view of the Christian life, let us at least take notice of the very obvious fact that the experience of faith, of walking with God, of being a follower of Jesus Christ in this world varies dramatically from person to person. No two Christian lives are the same in this respect. When Lloyd-Jones argued for a second distinct work of the Holy Spirit as necessary to lift the Christian life to its higher realms and invest it with greater powers, much of his argument was derived from Christian biography. He referred to English Puritans, to Jonathan Edwards, D.L. Moody, even Charles Finney.

Invariably he picked up on powerful experiences these men had, subsequent to their conversions, experiences of the love of God and of the assurance of salvation, not, interestingly speaking in tongues or prophesying. He could have mentioned many more such Christian people who in their diaries or journals or autobiographies describe such powerful experiences of encounter with the Lord through the Holy Spirit. Wishing such experiences for myself I always notice these in my reading of Christian biography. In Thomas Kidd's new biography of George Whitefield I noticed how often Whitefield and some of his converts reported experiences of ecstasy, intense joy in the Lord. It was a time of revival, and revivals are often marked by powerful spiritual experiences, whether of the fear of God, of contrition, of spiritual sorrow, or joy and delight in the love of God. For example, on one of his crossings of the Atlantic, Whitefield reports that "the freeness and richness of God's everlasting love" so overwhelmed him that it occasionally rendered him speechless. [Kidd, 86] On another occasion, Whitefield reported, "Divine manifestations flowed in so fast, that my frail tabernacle [he means his body] was scarce able to sustain them." Surrounded by friends he lay in an ecstatic state for half an hour. [135]

I've had one experience of ecstasy in the Lord in my life, but only one, and nothing quite like that. And many Christians will say, ruefully, that they have never had an experience at all like that. Whitefield had many. But then we have never spoken in foreign languages or prophesied, nor did Whitefield or Edwards or the Puritans. Others have had powerful, emotional, even devastating experiences of the conviction of sin while many Christians, who certainly know themselves sinners, have not. The fact is the Bible says comparatively little about what sort of *experiences* a Christian will have. It gives us some examples – think, for example of the experience of the author of Psalm 73 whose struggles with doubt were overcome in a moment of ecstasy in contemplation of the love of God – but it does not provide some kind of formula or a map of Christian experience so that you are able to locate yourself where you are in the course of the Christian life.

Conversions come in all shapes and sizes and so does the Christian life. No two are the same in the experiences that make it up. And the experiences are not what finally matter, even here.

These men lived for years knowing the one who prophesied the coming of the savior and not even knowing that the savior had come! Strange! It was a great gift given both to these twelve men and to Ephesus that they should be enabled to speak in tongues and prophecy, but what mattered was that they heard of Jesus Christ, believed in him, and were baptized. Their unusual situation, as disciples of John the Baptist, explains perhaps the manifestations of the Spirit's presence; their full incorporation into the church needed to be openly demonstrated (Peterson, 533], but in all the ways that matter, they were as every Christian, believing in Jesus and being baptized in the name of the triune God.

We may envy them their privileges – who would not want the power to speak a language he or she had never learned or, unbidden, to have the very word of God come out of one's mouth – but only few were given that privilege, as only a few actually witnessed the ministry of Jesus himself; but multitudes have believed in Jesus and begun to follow him in faith. Of the multitudes already in heaven, only a small number ever spoke in tongues when on earth. It isn't what counts. As Paul says here, “to believe in the one who came after John, Jesus Christ, that is what counts.”

But, as we conclude, let no one misunderstand me. We may deny that there is such a thing as a distinct, second work of grace in a believer's life, a visitation of the Holy Spirit that enables believers to break through to the higher regions of the Christian life. But that does not mean that we are not empowered by the Holy Spirit to great things, to godliness, love, and fruitfulness in Christian service. *Every Christian is so empowered.*

Our doctrine is, as the New Testament teaches throughout, that the Spirit of God is at work in our souls to make himself known, or better, to make Christ known and felt, and that work, being as personal as that work is – the Spirit a person and we being persons – and not at all mechanical, varies in degree at different times and is conducted in different ways. The Christian life is not two-stages, but one, and it is a life characterized by very different experiences and very different circumstances depending upon any believer's time and place and upon the Lord's will for his or her life. It has always been so and is so today. Concern yourself not with what some other Christian has or had, but with what every Christian has: Jesus Christ, salvation in him, and a life to be lived for him in the power of the Spirit.

This is the most important thing to carry away from these verses; from Acts 19 and other texts like it. The Spirit who produced such startling demonstrations of his presence and power, *that same Spirit is in us*, you and me today, if we are believers in and followers of Jesus Christ. That same power is with us. Every Christian is to be filled *with that same Holy Spirit* and to walk with that same Spirit. We do not have to wait for some empowerment we do not yet have. We must make the most of the power we have already been given. We must never content ourselves with the merely ordinary and pedestrian in our Christian life. You and I, alas, are doing that all the time: growing so used to the ordinary that we're not striving for more. We should be, you and I, always aiming for the stars; even as the sinners we remain. As our Savior told us, “Be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.” The Spirit is in us and with us to enable us to do that. *And that is a fact every Christian is to reckon with every single day!*