

Am I missing something?

A Sermon on Acts 19:1-7

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Am I **missing something** in my Christian life? Something **vital, pivotal, and monumental**? Is there some watershed **experience**, key piece of **knowledge**, or essential heavenly **gift** that I **lack**, but if I **had**, would **transform** my spiritual life, would **lift** me above **struggle, defeat, and frustration** to a **higher plane** of Christian experience... would shift my sanctification into a **higher gear**... would give me a fuller, perhaps even a **nearly complete, victory** over my sin...or would significantly enhance and complete my **faith**? Am I merely an **ordinary Christian** slogging it out in the trenches and weeds of a fallen world when I **could** be **extraordinary saint**, treading on high places- if **only** I had that **key experience**, that **divine blessing**, that **heavenly gift**?

“Am I missing something in my Christian life?” is, likely, a question that has occurred to **most** of you at one point or another in your Christian life. Perhaps it was sparked by reading or hearing about the extraordinary lives of **Christian heroes** from **history** and feeling that your **own** life, in comparison, was rather **pedestrian, mediocre, or forgettable**. Perhaps it occurred to you in a spiritual **dry** season where you felt **lackluster, bored, uninspired, discouraged, or weary** and you couldn't seem to **shake** the mood. Perhaps it occurred to you in a moment of **defeat**...once again you found yourself bested by your **besetting** sin, or maybe in a moment where the **consequences** of your sin caught up with you...and you thought to yourself, “surely, this is **not** how the Christian life is supposed to be!” Or perhaps the question occurred to you as you remembered a **spiritual mountain top experience** from your **past** and wondered, **wistfully**, “what happened to all that **passion and energy** I used to have?”

But it's not only an **experiential** question that occurs to many Christians at some point in their lives; it's a **theological** and **exegetical** one as well.

Denominations and theological traditions line up on either side of the question of whether the Bible presents the Christian life in terms of **one** or **two stages** or **tiers**. On one side, many Pentecostals, Wesleyans¹, mystics of various sorts, and even some Roman Catholics² argue that there are **two distinct phases** of the Christian life: **conversion** and some **second phase** or **tier**. Although there are different **terms** for this concept (*for example “second blessing,” “second work of grace,” “Spirit-filled Christian,” “baptism in the Spirit” or perhaps “entire sanctification”*) and different **nuances** between these, the point of **commonality** is that **each** views the Christian life in terms of two **distinct** phases, the **second** of which involves the Christian being **empowered** to live an **extraordinary** Christian life. And while this second phase or tier is **available** to all Christians, **not** all Christians **experience** or **achieve** it- in fact- by their reckoning, most don’t- thus remaining on the **first**, and **lower**, tier of Christian experience.

To put this in Millennial terms, the “second work of grace” is the Christian equivalent of **Mario** leveling up after eating a **red mushroom** or getting **star power**, Goku going **Super Saiyan**, or **Pikachu** evolving into **Raichu**.

On the **other** hand, there are many theological traditions, including our own, which argue that we should think of the Christian life in terms of a **continuum** rather than in terms of distinct **phases** or **tiers**. Of course, Christians may be more or less **mature**, more or less **godly**, more or less **effective**, more or less **faithful**, but there is no **paradigm** of **distinct levels** or **phases** in the Christian life. There is no “**second blessing**” or “**second work of grace**” which has the potential to lift ordinary Christians onto a **higher plane** of spiritual experience or shift them into a **higher gear** of sanctification.

Our **sermon text** this evening, Acts 19:1-7, is inextricably tied up with these kinds of questions because it is one of the **primary prooftexts** used by advocates of the **two-stage model**. In their view, this text (among others) presents us with a

¹ Rayburn, “Christian Experience” Acts 19:1-10

² Ferguson The Holy Spirit pg 82

paradigm of the Christian life in which it is possible for you to be a **genuine** Christian believer, yet **without** the **empowerment** of the **Holy Spirit**.

So, as we read the text, ask yourself... “Is this text teaching a **two-stage view** of the Christian life? If **not**, what is going on here?”

Acts 19:1-7

This is the Word of the Lord...

Please keep the text in front of you, and may the Lord help us to understand, believe, and obey His word.

Does our sermon text teach a **two-stage view** of Christian **sanctification**? In other words, does it teach that you can be a **genuine** Christian, and yet, still be without the **vital, pivotal** blessing of the Holy Spirit's **empowerment** and **presence**?

In this sermon, I'm going to argue that it does **not**, but, before I make that case, let me give you the **gist** of why some of our fellow Christians have concluded that the passage **does** teach such a paradigm. Notice that this passage **seems** to imply that these 12 men were **disciples** of Christ and **believers** in Christ. Notice that Luke calls them "**disciples**" in verse 1. In a few moments I'm going to argue that what Luke means here is disciples **of John the Baptist**, **not** disciples of **Christ**, but, as many commentators have pointed out, Luke leaves the term **ambiguous** here. Moreover, as many commentators have argued, in the vast majority of cases in Luke's writings, the term "**disciple**" means a disciple **of Christ**, and so it would seem **unusual** for Luke not to specify "disciple **of John**" if that is what he **meant**.

Notice as well that Paul, in verse 2, refers to these 12 men as having "**believed**," which in context, **seems** to be about genuinely believing in the **Messiah** whom John the Baptist foretold. Although all honest Bible readers would have to admit that the Bible sometimes speaks of "**believing**" in a sense that is **less** than genuine, lasting, full-orbed faith (*think, for example, of the way the demons "believe" in James 2:19, or of those who "believe for a while and in time of testing fall away" in the parable of the sower in Luke 8:13*), you can make a case that the **ordinary** sense of "believe" is **saving faith**.

And if it's true that these 12 men **are** genuine disciples of Christ and believers (in other words, genuine Christians), so the argument goes, then it **seems** to follow from this text that it is **entirely possible** for **genuine** Christians to be **without** the special **blessing** and **empowerment** of the Holy Spirit. After all, that seems to be

exactly the condition of these 12 men **prior** to Paul’s arrival: **Luke** calls them **disciples**, and **Paul** mentions them “**believing**,” and yet they clearly have **not** “received the Holy Spirit” (verse 2). Therefore, the argument goes, it must be possible to be a genuine Christian and yet to **lack** this “baptism of the Spirit” or “second work of grace” which, supposedly, brings one to a **higher** plane of Christian experience.

So, what’s wrong with this reading of our sermon text?

First, let me remind you of a relevant principle of Biblical interpretation. Anytime we are reading a historical narrative we need to keep in mind the distinction between what is **prescriptive** and what is merely **descriptive**. Remember Luke’s description of the early church in Acts 2:42, “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” I have yet to encounter a Christian who reads that **merely** as a **description**. It seems obvious to virtually all Christian readers that Luke is recording an **example** that we are supposed to **imitate**. On the other hand, I have **yet** to find a Christian who believes that Jesus’ idiosyncratic method of healing the blind man at the end of Mark 7 (*sticking his fingers in the man’s ears, spitting, touching the man’s tongue, sighing deeply, and looking up at heaven*) is a **detailed** paradigm for how **we** ought to interact with the hearing-impaired people in **our** lives.

As you read our sermon text, remember, that just because the Bible **records** an event, does not **necessarily** mean that event is to be used as a **paradigm** for every detail of our own Christian experience.

Secondly, I want to argue that these men were **not Christians**, at least in the **ordinary** sense of the word, and thus we should be **cautious** about using them as **normative models** for Christian experience.

Admittedly, this point is **complex** and **controversial**. I consulted over a **dozen** commentaries, sermons, or podcasts on this text, most of them written from a

Reformed and **evangelical** perspective, and **even within those** I found a **range** of views on the spiritual condition of these 12 Ephesian men.

Nevertheless, I think the point stands, and I'll tell you why, hopefully without getting too far into the weeds.³ First, that these men were **not** Christians, at least in any **ordinary** sense of the word, is **evidenced** by the fact that they had not been **baptized** in the name of Jesus. Look again at verses 3 and 4 and remember what we have seen so far concerning the **significance of baptism** in the book of Acts. Among other things, we have seen that Christian baptism is a **boundary marker**. It is the **official, public, outward** display of **belonging** in the Christian community. Remember how Luke concludes his description of Pentecost in Acts 2:41, "So those who **received** his **word** were **baptized**, and there were **added** that day about three thousand **souls**." Or remember Peter's **conclusion** in Acts **10** after seeing that the **Holy Spirit had fallen** on the Gentile Cornelius and his household, "Can anyone withhold water for **baptizing** these people, who have received the Holy Spirit **just** as **we** have?"

Of course, Christian Baptism, **in and of itself**, does not make one a **true** and **faithful** Christian. And we could add that Christian baptism is **not strictly** and **absolutely** required to be **saved**. For example, think of elect, covenant children who die **before** baptism is **physically possible**.

Nevertheless, generally speaking, it is **virtually an oxymoron** to speak of an **unbaptized Christian**, for baptism is **the means** by which we are identified with the **name** of Christ. Not only here in verse 6, but again and again in Acts, we see that people are baptized "**in**" or "**into**" the **name** of Jesus.

An "unbaptized Christian" is as much an anomaly as a child who is born into a family but never **named**. Names are **central** to our **identity**, and it is in **Christian Baptism** that we receive the **name** of Jesus **Christ**, or **Christian**.

³ Admittedly, this sermon is a bit more technical and exegetical than my normal approach. But this is an odd, challenging, and controversial text, and I think the two stage paradigm is both prevalent enough and dangerous enough to warrant a detailed rebuttal.

Secondly, that these men were **not** Christians, at least in any ordinary sense of the word, is evidenced by the way **Paul's comments** move from the reception of the **Spirit to baptism to faith in Jesus**. Notice the **flow** of the conversation here in this passage. In particular, consider the **logical progression** of Paul's **two questions**. Paul follows up his **first** question- about receiving the Holy Spirit- with a question about **baptism**. In other words, Paul's **second** question **assumes** that the reception of the Holy Spirit is **normally tied to** Christian baptism. If Paul **did** hold to a two-stage view of the Christian life- and thus, did **NOT** assume that baptism and the reception of the Holy Spirit ordinarily have a very strong connection, then his second question would seem to be a **non-sequitur**. After all, in the two-stage model, there is, at **best**, only a very **loose** connection between the sacrament of baptism and the experience of "the second blessing."

But, even **more** to the point, notice that Paul's **third** statement in verse 4 does **not** move in the direction of what is **supplemental** and **secondary**, but towards what is **primary** and **fundamental: faith in Jesus**. If, as the two-stage reading of this passage would suggest, these men **were** Christians who simply **lacked** the "**second blessing**," then you would expect Paul's comments to move in that direction as he diagnosed their problem. Instead, his third comment moves in the **opposite** direction: back towards the **most fundamental** issue of the Christian life- **faith in Christ**.

Look again at verse 4 and notice how it ends with an implicit call for these disciples to put their **faith in Christ**. What seems to be happening here in this conversation is NOT that Paul is realizing that these men are genuine Christians in need of a supplemental experience of grace. On the contrary, what seems to be happening here is that, the more Paul talks with them, the more he realizes how deficient and incomplete their **entire foundation of faith** is. These men may well have been sincere followers of John the Baptist, but they had **not** received anything more than the most **rudimentary** and **fragmentary** instruction about Jesus.

On one level that might sound **strange**: wasn't John's ministry to prepare the way **for Jesus**? Didn't he teach about the coming **of Jesus**?

But it really **isn't** so strange if we will remember **two** facts about John the Baptist. First, John died **before** the most important events of Jesus' ministry: Jesus' passion, death, resurrection, and ascension. Secondly, **even John the Baptist himself** had a moment of significant **confusion** and **doubt** about Jesus' identity and mission.

At this point, it's helpful to **compare** and **contrast** these 12 disciples of John the Baptist with **Apollos** whom we heard about **last** week. Remember that Apollos had **also** been a disciple of John the Baptist. Acts 18:25 says that "he knew only the baptism of John." The major **difference**, however, between **Apollos** and **these** dozen is that Apollos "had been **instructed** in the way of the Lord." Notice that our sermon text does **NOT** say anything of the kind about **these** 12 disciples. On the contrary, our sermon text emphasizes their ignorance in verse 2, "We have not even heard that there **is** a Holy Spirit."⁴

All of this talk about **John the Baptist** brings me to the **third** reason I would argue that these men were **not yet Christians** when Paul met them: they were disciples of the **John the Baptist**. Against the view that "disciples" (verse 1) **always** and **only** means "disciples of Christ" is the simple fact that Luke himself refers to the **disciples** of John the Baptist in Luke **7**. True enough, Luke leaves the term disciples ambiguous here, but that could be simply because he is describing them from the perspective of how they first appeared to Paul before he questioned them.⁵ Furthermore, Luke clearly qualifies what "disciples" means here in the context by the reference to John's baptism.

Thinking about these men as disciples of John the Baptist helps us view this **entire text** in a different light. Remember that **most** of John's ministry happened **prior** to Christ's **public ministry**, and **all** of it happened **prior** to the inauguration of

⁴ By the way, their comment probably should be read as meaning they have not been informed of the Pentecostal **giving** of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, not that they have never **heard** of the Holy Spirit, since John the Baptist himself made the giving of the Holy Spirit a central point of teaching and since the OT itself speaks of the Holy Spirit. Then again, if they have not even heard of the Holy Spirit, my point is even stronger: how ignorant and uninformed their faith was!

⁵ Marshall, Acts.

the **New Covenant**. True, John the Baptist taught his disciples to believe in the coming Messiah, **but** their belief in Him was **anticipatory** and **shadowy**, lacking the **clarity** and **definition** that would come with Jesus' public ministry, death, burial, resurrection, and Ascension. In **that** sense, the faith of John the Baptist and his disciples had **more** in common with the faith of **Abraham, Moses, and David** than with **yours** and **mine**, since we have so much **more** knowledge of who the Messiah was and is. Of course all of those saints of old hoped in the **coming** Messiah, but they only knew him through **types** and **figures**: the **lamb** of God, the **scapegoat**, the prophet who would be **like Moses**. But we know Jesus in the living color and sharp definition of his **words** and **deeds**.

In other words, these 12 disciples of John the Baptist **were righteous** men, they **were** faithful followers and worshippers of **Yahweh**, and they **would** have gone to **heaven** if they had died **before** Paul got to them, but it's not **quite** right to say that they were fully-fledged **Christians** because **they had been discipled in a pre-Christian context**. Prior to Paul's arrival, their spiritual condition was like **Zechariah** and **Elizabeth** faithfully waiting for the coming Messiah, but not having a fraction of the knowledge of Him that you or I do.

So, those are three reasons why I think it's best **not** to think of these 12 men as "**Christians**" prior to meeting Paul, but rather as **faithful worshippers** of the Yahweh living in terms of a **pre-incarnation world**. And since they were **not** Christians prior to meeting Paul, we need to be very **careful** about using them as **paradigms** of Christian experience, **especially** when it comes to their experience of the Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit, an event which the Bible clearly describes as **eschatological!**⁶

⁶ Just to be clear, I To be clear, I am certainly **NOT** suggesting that Old Testament believers cannot serve as normative models for us! The Bible emphatically teaches that they can (Hebrews 11)! I am simply saying that we have to think **carefully about which parts of their experience** should serve as normative models for us, and which should not. For example, we can, and must, imitate Joshua's courage and zeal for warfare, but **not** by slaughtering the non-Jewish inhabitants of modern day Israel! As Christians, we no longer engage in that kind of holy war. We **now** fight **exclusively** with **spiritual** weapons, and primarily against spiritual enemies (2 Cor 10:4, Eph 6:12). Similarly, we can, and must, imitate the faith of Abraham, but **NOT** by submitting to circumcision- but instead by believing in Christ and being baptized.

And this brings us back to the third main argument for why this text does **not** teach a **two-stage model** of the Christian life: the burden of this text is **not** to present us with an **paradigm** of **individual sanctification**, but to show us the progress of **redemptive-history**.

According to **WWII lore**, there was a small, remote Japanese island that lost contact with the mainland during the **American invasion**. Many months after the war was over, a small group of Japanese soldiers were discovered to be still defending a bunker, thinking the war was still going on.

In one sense, these 12 disciples of John were like those Japanese soldiers: they were faithfully serving their master, but they **simply didn't know** that **history** had turned a **corner**. They were still living under the **assumptions** and **practices** of a bygone era, until Paul, the apostle of Christ, proclaimed the dawn of the **new age**.

John Stott put it this way, “In a word, they were still living in the Old Testament which concluded with John the Baptist. They understood neither that the new age had been ushered in by Jesus, nor that those who believe in him and are baptized into him receive the distinctive blessing of the new age, the indwelling Spirit.” Stott goes on to explain the significance of these men receiving the Spirit after being baptized, “they experienced a **mini Pentecost**. Better, Pentecost **caught up** on them. Better still, they were caught up **into it**, as its promised blessings became theirs.”

These 12 disciples lived during a **unique** time: the **transition** into the **Messianic** age. Therefore, it stands to reason that their **experience** of this great transition would have been **unique** as well, not a paradigm for **us**.

Furthermore, the Bible emphasizes that Pentecost is an eschatological event (Joel 2), and thus, unique and unrepeatable (see Ferguson's book, ch 4). Although believers under the Mosaic and Abrahamic covenants certainly had the Spirit in some sense (Ps 51:11), there is some degree of discontinuity at this point of the Pentecostal outpouring of the HS. Thus, we have all the more reason to avoid making these 12 disciples of John the Baptist a paradigm **at this particular point**.

More could be said against this two-stage view of the Christian life⁷, but for now, let's move towards a conclusion by considering **three implications** of **rejecting** the **two-stage model**.

The **first** implication of rejecting a two-stage view of the Christian life is that it normalizes our experiences of **struggle** in **sanctification**. The facts that you have not yet **arrived**, that you still experience moments of **frustration** and **discouragement**, that you are **not yet sinless** and entirely **sanctified**, that you are **not** always walking on a **spiritual Cloud 9**, that you still have **remnants** of **idolatry** and **unbelief** in your heart, and that you are still a “**work in progress**” are **not** signs that you are a **second-class** Christian, or in a **lower tier** of Christian spirituality. They are simply signs that you are **normal**, that you are **aware of** and **honest about** your sin and need, that you are, as Luther put it, **simultaneously justified** (because you are in Christ) **and sinful** (because you still battle with the flesh).

The two-stage view **advertises itself** as a **solution** to the long **slog** of the Christian life by promising an **easy-button** that can elevate us **beyond struggle**. **Ironically**, it ends up being a source of **discouragement** in the **long** run, because it is a **fantasy**. Either we will **falsely** think that we had a “second work of grace” and then wind up **disillusioned** when we find ourselves to still be sinners and sufferers, **or** we will spend our lives wondering why the Lord **denied us** the pivotal, vital blessing He gave to **others**.

Secondly, rejecting the two-stage model keeps us **humble**. **Pride** and **presumption** are **dangers** for this model of the Christian life. When I was in college, there was a **traveling street preacher** who came to do open-air evangelism every spring at the University of Alabama. Sadly, he was notorious among the students, not only for his method of gathering a crowd by speaking words of **contempt** about college students, but also for his **self-righteousness**. In his angry confrontations with crowds of students, he claimed **not** to have **sinned** a

⁷ Another important argument against the two-stage view is that this passage (or other ones in Acts about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit) never indicates that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit elevates these men to a higher level of spirituality. On the contrary, the Corinthian church had many extraordinary expressions of Spiritual activity, and yet it was an immature, divided, messy church.

single time since being converted to Christ **10 years prior**, although he later **qualified** that he had sinned **once**, but it was **only** because he didn't know at the time that what he was doing was **sinful**.

Now, I'm certainly **not** suggesting that every Christian who holds to such a model is **necessarily proud** or **presumptuous**. But I **am** suggesting that this doctrine is **at odds** with the idea that we must live with a sense of **carefulness**, **fear** of God, and **dependence** on the Lord **at every point**. How much would we really need to trust in the Lord and cling to Him daily if we had been zapped with a lightning strike of spiritual power? If we are convinced that we have been elevated **beyond** struggle and sin, then how will we “work out our salvation with fear and trembling,” and be “poor in spirit”?

Thirdly, rejecting the two-stage model will encourage us to stay **focused**. If we **genuinely** believe that there is some kind of **pivotal, transformative** post-conversion experience to be had, then we will be tempted to make the **search** for that experience the **primary focus** of our **discipleship**. That might mean looking for the **right pastor** to lay hands on us, finding the right “**worship experience**,” always searching for the **next revival event** or **spiritual high**, or experimenting with **extreme** forms of **prayer** and **fasting**. But, in any case, it will probably **not** mean a steady and disciplined **use of** and **submission to** the **only** means which the Lord has **promised** to bless: the Word, prayer, sacraments, the fellowship of the saints, trials and adversity.

Of course the Lord **can**, and **does**, use all kinds of experiences to shape and sanctify us. But **which ones** He sends and at **which times** and to **what end** all belong to the counsel of **His** providence. **His** is to order our steps, **ours** is to submit to whatever He sends, and to devote ourselves to the means of grace which He has promised to bless.

Christian, the Lord has **already** given you everything you need for your growth in holiness. In your **baptism**, you have been **united** to Christ. You have **died** to sin and been **raised** to new life, and His **Spirit** has been poured out on you. In His

word, the Lord has given you all the **encouragement, warning, instruction,** and **guidance** that you will need. In the **Lord's Supper** He **communes** and **nourishes** you. In the **fellowship** of His people He has provided **companionship, help,** and **protection.**

Believe that these things are so. Devote yourselves to **these** means of grace. Trust that **He** will orchestrate your circumstances and experiences to reveal your flaws, test your faith, and refine your character. And He will bring us to maturity in His timing and His way. Amen!

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