

December 8, 2013

A Gospel Centered Community

Did You Receive the Holy Spirit When You Believed?

Acts 19:1 – 10

We've been moving through the book of Acts and looking at how the Christian church started in a small backwater province of the Roman Empire as a peculiar offshoot of Judaism and became the dominant religion of the Empire within a couple hundred years. And one of the reasons for the rapid spread and pervasive nature of Christianity, as Ben pointed out last week was the way early Christians lived and died in the world. In the face of an idolatrous and immoral culture as we saw in Corinth, Christians lived their lives among the culture with a pattern of fearless humility. They were intentional, and relational, and biblical. Christians intentionally went to the social hubs of culture to engage people with the gospel. They related to each other as communities that modeled a way of life that was at the same time counter to the culture and attractive to the culture as they demonstrated the love of God to one another and the world. And they were people who were occupied with the word of God, letting it shape their thinking and their living and sharing the joy of Jesus through the gospel.

And the reason they could live this way, the reason we can live this way, in spite of the pressure that comes from our culture to make us fearful and afraid, in spite of the scorn and derision that tends to make us tentative and tongue-tied with the gospel, the power to live fearlessly humble, is the power of the cross. The cross stands eternally as a testament to the truth – the truth that all men are sinners before a righteous and holy God and need a Savior who died a painful and humiliating death to deliver us from sin and death and hell and bring us to God. Because He was forsaken, we will never be forsaken – *for I am always with you*. We are forever accepted and loved by the God who came from heaven to die for sinners like you and I. And if He loves us, and He is with us – what does it matter what the world might say or do?

So Paul lived and taught fearlessly in Corinth for a year and a half with the church there; and then the rest of chapter relates how he ended up that second trip back in Antioch. After spending some time there he then heads out into what we know as the area of Turkey or Asia Minor, traveling through Galatia and Phrygia strengthening the disciples. Eventually Paul comes to Ephesus and Luke says, beginning in chapter 19, that he found some disciples there. There is a kind of parenthesis from verse 23 to 28 in chapter 18 where we get the story of the beginning of the ministry of a man named Apollos, who meets a Christian couple in Ephesus who disciple him in the faith, but we're not going to go into his story this morning.

But it is in that same city, Ephesus, while Apollos is visiting the church in Corinth, that Paul comes and encounters some disciples. And the first thing Paul asks them is not, 'Have you believed in Jesus?' but rather, *"Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?"*. And it's around this question that I want to spend the next few minutes. First of all I want to look at why Paul would phrase the question this way; and then look at what it means to receive the Holy Spirit; and finally how do we do that? Basically we'll look at the why, the what, and the how of this question.

So why does Paul put the question like this? I would start by saying that receiving, or having the Holy Spirit is unmistakable evidence that we really belong to Christ. Positively, Ephesians 1:13 tells us that in Christ *'you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit'*. When you hear and believe the gospel, the Holy Spirit is given to you as a seal. In those days when someone sent a letter, they stamped it with a seal to prove that it came from them. In pagan cults of the day, followers were often tattooed to mark them as devotees. Whenever the gospel impacts a person to believe – the Holy Spirit is given as a seal of authenticity – that they are a child of God. Negatively, Romans 8 tells us that if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.

So here's Paul, meeting these guys in Ephesus for the first time, and he asks the question – Did you receive the Holy Spirit? And the only reason he would ask the question I believe, is that there was a lack of outward evidence that they were really believers. You see, Paul is not asking whether or not these guys have experienced a so-called second blessing. That is the teaching prevalent in many churches that there is the initial experience of belief leading to salvation, and the Holy Spirit comes in at that point to indwell the believer. That's the first blessing. But there is another experience of the Holy Spirit that believers need that is often called the baptism of the Holy Spirit – a second blessing. Now don't get me wrong. I am not arguing against subsequent visitations of the power of the Holy Spirit – I believe that we do experience further outpourings of the Holy Spirit. But that is not what this passage teaches.

There is strong evidence in the passage that these guys were not yet believers. Luke says they are disciples, but then later on in the passage we find out that they are followers of John the Baptist's ministry; they've been baptized only with the baptism of repentance; and they have no idea that there is even a Holy Spirit to receive. You see, Paul is asking the question as if there is way to know that we've received the Holy Spirit that is different than just saying, 'I believe in Jesus, therefore I must have received the Spirit'. And that is in fact the way he is talking. He expects that a person who has received the Holy Spirit knows it, not just because it's inferred by his faith in Christ. In other words, Paul talks like this is an experience with effects to which we can point.

In all the ways that Luke describes the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts – as being given, as falling on people, as coming on people, or being poured out on people, or being baptized, or being filled or by receiving – all those ways the coming of the Spirit is described, there are specific effects, definite experiences that come with it. At Pentecost we have speaking in tongues and praising the mighty works of God and the power to witness. In Samaria something happens that is so remarkable and obvious in experience that Simon sees it and wants to buy the power to make it happen. In the case of Cornelius, there was speaking in tongues and praising God. At Paul's conversion there is extraordinary boldness and power to witness. In chapter five, Luke records that God gave the Holy Spirit to everyone who is obeying Him – obedience then being a mark of the Holy Spirit's presence. And here in Ephesus we see the disciples speaking in tongues and prophesying.

In every case of the Holy Spirit coming or being poured out or being received in the book of Acts, there are definite effects that one can point to as evidence that the Spirit has been received and belief in Jesus authenticated. In Acts there is boldness and power for gospel witness; there is joyful obedience to God's commands; there is speaking in tongues and prophesying; there is free and overflowing praise and adoration for God. And in the epistles we see the fruit of the Spirit defining the Christian's character – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Clear, definite, definable effects that testify that we have received the Holy Spirit and are genuine believers.

Here we see that Paul expects the receiving of the Holy Spirit to be a real, identifiable, defining experience of the living God that marks us as genuine believers. And evidently these guys didn't have it, otherwise Paul wouldn't have asked the question. And it is a question we need to ask. If you ask someone if they are a Christian and they merely point to a time in the past when they prayed a prayer or walked down an aisle or raised their hand, they may be like these disciples – ***they may have a gospel of repentance but not a gospel of salvation.*** Can you say, 'Yes I have seen the Spirit of praise in my life, filling my heart and my lips with worship and adoration to the Father and the Son. Yes, I have seen the Spirit of obedience at work in my life, killing sin and inclining my heart to God. Yes I have seen the Spirit of boldness and courage alive in me to share the good news of the grace of God with the lost. Yes I have seen the fruit of the Spirit in my life filling me with love and joy and the peace that passes all understanding.' If you don't know the answer to that question this morning, it may be that you have not believed and need to receive the Holy Spirit – you need to embrace the gospel and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

That is ***why*** Paul asked the question. ***Now we'll look at the what.*** What does it mean to receive the Holy Spirit? Unfortunately, in our contemporary Christian culture, that question raises all sorts of tribal issues – tribes being the various denominational, doctrinal divisions within the larger Protestant community. Overwhelmingly, when someone asks that question, it is usually answered by someone explaining that it means speaking in tongues.

But we cannot and must not reduce what receiving the Holy Spirit means to one effect that may or may not be present in any believer's life. We would affirm that there is a Holy Spirit given manifestation the Bible speaks of as the gift of tongues present and active in the church today. I'm not going to take on those who would argue that some of the gifts of the Holy Spirit disappeared after the first century because first of all they don't have a very defensible position from the Bible, and secondly, such an argument wouldn't be profitable for you. But I will argue the point that tongues are not a necessary part of receiving the Holy Spirit, because that is profitable for you. I don't want you to get the idea that people who don't speak in tongues are somehow second-class Christians who are missing out on the good stuff.

As we just saw, the way Paul phrases the question is the same way we might say, 'Do you believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord? And that's not a bad question by the way. It's just that Paul's question really exposes the reality of that belief – is there evidence to convict? Secondly, receiving the Holy Spirit doesn't necessarily mean that the gift of tongues are present. I would say that is not taught in the Bible. There are only three places in Acts where the gift of tongues are mentioned along with receiving the Holy Spirit or being filled or baptized in the Holy Spirit. The first is in Acts chapter 2 with the disciples in the upper room; the second is when Cornelius and his household were saved; and the third is here in verse 6: *And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying.* There is possibly a fourth with the believers in Samaria; but in nine other places where we have conversion stories, and many other places where filling by the Holy Spirit or receiving the Holy Spirit is mentioned, tongues are not. We cannot establish some sort of normative experience from only four incidents in Scripture.

Furthermore, Paul, who said he thanked God that he spoke in tongues more than any of the Corinthians did, also said that *'Not all speak in tongues'*. I am reminded here that the person you would most expect to speak in tongues as a sign of being filled with the Spirit, namely Jesus, never is seen to do so. What the Bible does teach about receiving the Holy Spirit is that it is evidence of authentic faith and the power to witness to the saving grace of Christ. It is that moment of real belief where knowledge about Jesus becomes faith in Jesus. It is what is referred to as being born again. In the gospel of John, Jesus tells Nicodemus, who has a lot of Bible knowledge about God, that unless he is born of the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God. This was the situation with the disciples in Ephesus. When Paul found out that there was no evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives, he preached the gospel: *And Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus."* Of course I'm fairly certain that Luke shortened the presentation somewhat because Paul never gave just a one-sentence message.

When they heard the word, they affirmed their faith by being baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus and they received the Holy Spirit. Again, this confirms what we have learned throughout this little journey through Acts – you cannot put God in a box. He works saving faith in those whom He calls in His own way. And it doesn't always look the same. Don't try to build a method out of this. According to the experience of Cornelius, these guys did it backward. Cornelius received the Holy Spirit and then was baptized – these guys got baptized then it says that they received the Holy Spirit. I tend to think that it was when Paul began to put them under that they experienced the joy of salvation because that would have been when he laid hands on them. I think the key thing to understand here is that saving faith means receiving the Holy Spirit and there will be some kind of evidence of that. The fact that these guys spoke in tongues and prophesied as a result served to confirm the authenticity of their faith to Paul and immediately connected them to what had happened in Jerusalem and Samaria.

I think too, the picture of baptism here serves to highlight the fact that when we embrace the gospel and believe, we are at that moment, baptized by the Spirit. *For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and all were made to drink of one Spirit.* 1 Corinthians 12:13 This is one important reason we baptize people. Not only is it a sign and testimony to the world and the principalities and powers that you are now a follower of Christ – it is also a powerful reminder that when you believe, you are baptized by the Holy Spirit – you've received the Holy Spirit. And it would not be out of order to come up from the water as these guys did, speaking in tongues and prophesying. It may however startle the rest of us.

Finally we get to the how – **how do we receive the Holy Spirit?** Does someone need to lay hands on us? Do we have to tarry for it? Back in the heyday of the Pentecostal revivals in Azuza Street and other places, people were taught that you needed special times of waiting or tarrying based on the Lord's command to the disciples in Luke 24 to 'tarry in Jerusalem' till the Holy Spirit would come and fill you. But I think the testimony of Scripture is very plain and very simple. Wherever we look in the Bible, three things stand out in relation to this. First of all we must **hear the word**. These disciples had never even heard of the Holy Spirit. All they knew was the message of John which was a message of preparation – not salvation. Nobody got saved by John. He was pointing the way to the Savior. He came preaching, 'Prepare the way of the Lord – repent of your sins'. But the gospel says, 'Repent of your sins and believe in the Lord Jesus'. So Paul preaches the gospel to these guys. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God.

The second thing that needs to happen is that we must **receive the word**. When Peter preaches the word to the crowd in Jerusalem, Luke records that they not only heard the word and were cut to the heart but that they received the word. Receiving the word means that you embrace it – you may not understand it all, but the Word of God becomes alive to you and it becomes part of you so that you find that you do trust the Christ that it presents. You trust that your sins have been forgiven – in many cases there is a feeling that a great weight has been lifted. You trust in His power to change you utterly and help you obey His word. And you find yourself at the very same time repenting of going your own way, doing your own thing, and turning to Him for provision, and power and meaning in life.

And finally we must **obey the word**. Notice that these disciples who heard the word and believed the word were baptized right away. We saw that with the jailer and his household in Philippi; we saw that at the beginning with the 3,000; we saw it with Philip and the Ethiopian official; we saw it with Cornelius and his household. The command Jesus gave to His church in Matthew 28 says that we are to go and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is obedience to this command that marks authentic faith. Now at the same time, we would argue that baptism is not salvific – that is, baptism does not save – but nevertheless Jesus commanded that we baptize and be baptized. ***Baptism is the outward expression of the inward change that happens when we receive the Holy Spirit.***

Incidentally, this is the only place in Scripture where we see re-baptism. These guys had been baptized into John's baptism, but Paul has no reservations about re-baptizing them into the baptism of Jesus. Which tells us a couple of important things; the first being that baptism in and of itself doesn't save you – it is faith in Christ alone. It also tells us that baptism is the normal, expected response to embracing the message of salvation. It was the universal expression of all Christians in the New Testament; and in fact, there were no unbaptized Christians after the day of Pentecost. Jesus commands it – the early church practiced it – and so do we. If you have put your faith in Jesus, baptism is for you.

I know that some of you were baptized in other traditions, perhaps you were sprinkled or had water poured over you or something else – the important thing is not the form of baptism, but the reality of what it means. Baptism is the response of a heart that has been changed by the Holy Spirit and the evidence of a desire to follow Jesus as one of His disciples. So if you're here this morning and you're saying, 'Well I was baptized as a child a long time ago but it didn't really mean anything – my heart had not been changed' but since then you have responded to the gospel and your heart has been changed – then I would invite you, just like these Ephesian men, to be re-baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

I would also invite those who have believed and have not been baptized to join together with all the disciples of Jesus for the past 2,000 years to enter the waters of baptism as the outward expression of that inward change the gospel has made in your heart. I would also invite those who have not embraced the faith of Jesus to experience the greatest thing in the world – Repent, trust Christ, open yourself to the power of the Holy Spirit, be baptized in His name, and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Our gracious God and Father,

We thank you Father that you have put Your Holy Spirit as a seal on those who have believed. Come Holy Spirit, fill us and occupy our whole being – flooding our lips with worship and praise, working obedience in our lives, killing sin and inclining our hearts to God. Let Your presence fill us with boldness and courage to share the good news of Your grace with the lost. Let Your fruit take root and blossom in our souls. Expel every rebel lust and reign supreme. Grant that those who do not have this seal of salvation in their hearts would hear this word this morning and receive it with gladness and trust in Christ – their sins forgiven, repentance granted, the power to change imparted. Give them faith to behold their names engraven in Your hand, soul and body redeemed by Your blood, hope restored and life renewed in the name of Jesus. Let us be those who wholly delight in God through Jesus Christ, sharing His joy through the gospel to all people we pray, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.