Chapter 48: Preparation and Fulfillment

Acts 19:1–7

In the previous section, Paul had come to Ephesus, but soon departed to travel to Caesarea, Antioch, and throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia (Acts 18:19–23). During Paul's absence, Apollos had "watered" (1 Cor. 3:6) in Ephesus. In Acts 19:1–7, as Paul comes to Ephesus, he discovers other "disciples" who know only the baptism of John. This is a difficult story to interpret in some ways; however, the key themes are absolutely clear: *there is no Christianity apart from Christ and the Holy Spirit*.

A Baptism of Preparation (Acts 19:1–4)

At some point, Apollos departs from Ephesus as well, moving on to Corinth, and during that time Paul came back to Ephesus, where "he found some disciples" (v. 1). What we learn in the rest of the narrative will make the exact sense of the term "disciples" here unclear, since these disciples "have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit" and needed to be "baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus" and to receive the Holy Spirit (vv. 3, 5, 6). In the scholarly debate, some argue that these individuals are indeed Christian disciples, although not far along in their discipleship.[1] Others, however, argue that these are only disciples of John the Baptist (see Luke 5:33; 7:18).[2]

The reason this debate is difficult has to do with the connection between the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus. John was the greatest prophet of the *Old* Testament era (Matt. 11:11–12). He came as a forerunner, to "prepare the way of the Lord" (Matt. 3:1–3; Mark 1:1–3; Luke 3:1–6; John 1:23). He insisted that he was not the Christ, but that he had come to prepare the way for the Christ (John 1:20). Especially, he prepared the way for the coming of the Christ by a baptism of repentance for sins (Matt. 3:6, 11; Mark 1:4–5; Luke 3:3). Fundamentally, this was a *preparatory* baptism of water that pointed forward to the One with the authority to baptize with the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:11–12; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16–17; John 1:26–27, 31–33; Acts 1:5). It was through this baptism of repentance that the Christ "might be revealed to Israel" (John 1:31). John therefore accomplished his purpose when he announced the identity of the Spirit-baptizer, saying, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

We must make a few essential observations about this interplay between the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus. First, there was a connection, but a distinction, between John's water baptism and Jesus' baptism with the Holy Spirit. Although these individuals are baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, we do not read that any of John's original disciples were baptized again in the name of the Lord Jesus after beginning to follow Jesus (e.g., Andrew, who was presumably baptized as a disciple

[1] Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 384–85.

[2] Polhill, *Acts*, 398–99.

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of John before following Jesus; John 1:35, 40).[3] Second, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was connected to the Christ's sacrifice for sins, as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." To be ignorant of the ministry of the Holy Spirit is to be ignorant of the sin-cleansing work of the Christ.[4]

Third and finally, because John always insisted that his baptism was preparatory for the coming of the One who would baptize with the Holy Spirit, it is astonishing that they had not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit (v. 2). We are not told what led Paul to ask his question of whether they received the Holy Spirit when they believed, but he had put his finger on an important gap in their discipleship. Yet, as stated earlier, if these disciples did not understand what John had said about the ministry of the Holy Spirit, they clearly did not understand the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to take away the sin of the world.[5]

These observations do not answer all of our questions about the background of these individuals; however, these observations do help us to understand their status. These were men who had been *prepared* for the Messiah in the initial method of a baptism for repentance from their sins; however, they did not know about the Savior who died to forgive them from their sins, or about the Holy Spirit who would come to apply that salvation and the gifts of the Savior to them. They had come to the pinnacle of Old Testament anticipation, but they had not heard John's identification of Jesus as the Lamb of God who will take away the sin of the world.[6] Bruce puts this well: "But now that Jesus had come and accomplished His mission on earth, now that He was raised from the dead and exalted at God's right hand, whence He had sent the promised gift of the Holy Spirit, an anticipatory baptism was inappropriate and inadequate."[7] Importantly, we do not read any indication that these were believers in *Jesus*. Lenski is likely correct that these were not disciples of John directly, but disciples of those who had "scattered…after John's early death" and "tried to perpetuate his baptism and teaching."[8] This teaching (or, at least the way this teaching had been received) missed the key connection that John everywhere drew between his own ministry and the greater coming ministry of Jesus Christ.[9]

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[3] Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:209.

[4] "Even if they had only been baptized with John's baptism, they conceivably knew that John had spoken of a coming baptism with the Holy Spirit; they did not know, however, that this expected baptism was now an accomplished fact." (Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 385–86.)

[5] Polhill, *Acts*, 399.

[6] I have benefited greatly in my interpretation of this passage from Marcus Mininger's related work on the apostasy passage from Hebrews 6, which he persuasively argues refers to those who would seek to *return* to this position of preparation for the Messiah, without any reference to Jesus. See Marcus A. Mininger, *Impossible to Be Restored? Temptation and Warning in the Epistle of Hebrews*, NSBT 64 (Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2025).

[7] Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 386.

[8] Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 781–82.

[9] "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." (Polhill, *Acts*, 399.)

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A Baptism of Fulfillment (Acts 19:5–7)

For this reason, when we read that these disciples "were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus" (v. 5), Luke is not telling us about something to do merely with the form of the words used to administer the baptism. Further, this is not to say that the baptisms that John himself administered during his lifetime were insufficient, so that those disciples who were then baptized needed to go through the rite of baptism again. During John's lifetime, he baptized in a preparatory way that pointed forward to the coming of the Messiah and the baptism of the Holy Spirit that the Messiah would administer. After Jesus the Messiah had come, died, risen, ascended, and poured out his Holy Spirit, a baptism of anticipation missed the mark entirely. Such a baptism actually pointed people *away* from Christ, suggesting that God's people were still awaiting the coming of the Messiah. Polhill writes, "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."[10]

These disciples, then, are not merely receiving a different method of baptism. They are receiving the One to whom John's baptism always pointed—the One to whom Christian baptism still points. The difference between John's baptism and Christian baptism is only one of *time*.[11] Before Jesus had accomplished everything as the Lamb of God who came to take away the sin of the world, John's baptism of preparation and anticipation was necessary. After Jesus had bestowed his Spirit, we rather need a Christian baptism that affirms the fullness of Christ's accomplishment.

Accordingly, these disciples are not only baptized into the name of Jesus, but Paul lays his hands on them for them to receive the Holy Spirit (v. 6). This probably also helps to explain why the Holy Spirit comes upon these believers. Peterson writes this:

> So why did the group in Ephesus collectively experience the phenomena of tongues and prophecy when other converts in Acts apparently did not? At one level, it was the appropriately dramatic inauguration of Paul's ministry in this city, where God's Spirit would be remarkably at work, opposing the power of magic and false religion, and winning many to Christ throughout the region. At another level, it was specifically related to the identity and need of these particular men. As those influenced in some way by the ministry of John the Baptist, they were brought collectively into the community 'established by Jesus and his disciples through the Spirit'. In salvation-historical terms, they were a transitional group, whose full incorporation into the church needed to be openly demonstrated.[12]

Thus, these twelve men received the fullness not only of Jesus the Messiah, but of the Holy Spirit whom Jesus had come to bestow upon his people. The dramatic works of the Holy Spirit for prophesying and speaking in tongues was proof that something decisive had changed in their faith.

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[10] Polhill, *Acts*, 399.

[11] Calvin notes not only that we do not read about the rebaptism of any of Jesus' disciples after their (presumable) baptism by John, but also that Jesus himself received baptism once for all at the hands of John. Jesus did not need a further baptism later, because his own baptism was the pinnacle of John's ministry to identify Jesus as the Christ (John 1:31–34; Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:209).

[12] Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 533.

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As for the fact that there were twelve of these men (v. 7), there is no indication that these men form a new Israel (twelve tribes) or even a new church (twelve apostles). Yet, there is certainly something *fitting* about there being twelve of these men, since they cross the bridge between the Old and the New Testaments through faith in Jesus Christ and by receiving the Holy Spirit. We see a picture of what the people of God must be: not merely *prepared* for the coming of the Messiah, but fully embracing him—along with the Spirit whom he pours out. Indeed, there is no Christianity apart from Christ and the Holy Spirit.

To some degree, the situation in this story is unrepeatable. We are dealing with people who were close enough to John the Baptist to follow his ministry to a point, but without knowing how John's ministry pointed to Jesus as the Christ and to the coming of the Holy Spirit. Disciples of John the Baptist do not exist any more, so there are no more partial converts to encounter. Yet, there are two practical implications from this story. First, this passage offers a warning against what Michael Horton has called "Christless" Christianity.[13] There are many false teachers who claim Christianity, but whose message amounts to nothing more than a message of moral reformation—a *preparation* for the coming of the Messiah, without a *declaration* that the Messiah has come, that he has poured out his Spirit, and that he will come again. Our faith is not about moral improvement, but about Christ crucified, resurrected, ascended, sending his Spirit, and one day returning again. This is not exactly the form of the faith of these disciples, but the result is the same in both cases. The only remedy is to call people to true repentance from sin that results in faith in Jesus Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Second, we recognize from this that baptisms that are not performed in recognition of each person of the Holy Trinity are not valid.[14] To baptize converts to Christ who come out of the cults of Mormonism or Jehovah's Witness beliefs is not to re-baptize, because they were never truly baptized. Those cults deny the true doctrine of the Trinity, so therefore the connection between the Son and the Holy Spirit. For the same reason that these partial converts who had been baptized into John's baptism needed to be baptized into the name of Jesus, so now every Christian must be baptized into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Discussion Questions

1. Where had Paul been before coming to Ephesus (Acts 18:19–23)? When might Apollos have left Ephesus (Acts 18:24–28)? Who were the "disciples" that Paul meets (v. 1)? What do we know about the extent of their faith before Paul finds them? What did they know about the Holy Spirit (v. 2)? What had John the Baptist taught about the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:11–12; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16–17; John 1:26–27, 31–33; Acts 1:5)?

2. What does it mean that John's baptism was a "baptism of repentance" (v. 4)? In what way did John's baptism point forward to the ministry of Jesus (John 1:29)? Why did Jesus submit to John's baptism (Matt. 3:15)? What did John's baptism identify about Jesus (John 1:31)? What is the full connection between John the Baptist, Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon God's people?

[13] Michael Horton, *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012).

[14] Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 783–84.

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3. Did the disciples whom John had baptized need to be baptized again (John 1:35, 40)? Why, then, do you think that these disciples needed to be baptized after having been baptized into John's baptism (v. 5)? How does this baptism suggest a change in their faith toward believing in Jesus as the Messiah? How does the giving of the Holy Spirit point to the completion of the ministry to which John the Baptist had pointed (v. 6)? Why might the "twelve" be significant (v. 7)?

4. Why is a ministry of repentance from sin alone not enough? What does repentance from sin alone lack? Was the ministry of John the Baptist bad? Was the ministry outlined in the Old Testament bad? If those ministries were not bad, how do these passages show their insufficiency? How did they prepare for the coming of Christ? What is the danger of "Christless" Christianity today? Are you trusting in Christ, or only in some kind of moral repentance?

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