

## The Necessity of Gospel Clarity (Part 2)

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Acts: The Spirit Moving / Acts 19:1-7 / March 22, 2026

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### Introduction:

Last week, we considered the first of two stories Luke weaves together to show the necessity of gospel clarity at the end of Acts 18. This week, we will look at the second that opens Acts 19. In narrative literature, like Acts, we often see stories structured around a story arc. The story arc introduces a problem and follows its rising tension to a climax and resolution that is preceded by a trailing action. This structure guides readers to see the main point in the climax and resolution with everything else connecting to it. We saw this last week, as Luke gave the problem of Apollos only knowing John's baptism, climax of him boldly speaking in the synagogue, and resolution of Priscilla and Aquila explaining to him the way of God more accurately. This drew our attention to Priscilla and Aquila's discipleship of Apollos, as the tension building to that moment and the ministry effectiveness that followed emphasized its importance. Sometimes, biblical authors will continue the same problem in a joining story, progressing the tension to a greater climax and resolution to give extra attention to the point they are making. Luke does that in our passage today, progressing the problem from the story of Apollos to a heightened climax and resolution for us to see the crucial points about kingdom advancement. I see one point from our passage this morning,

### **We Must Receive the Washing of Regeneration and Renewal of the Holy Spirit**

Observe the story carefully with me to see this. Look at verse 1, "And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples." Note how Luke sets the stage by mentioning Apollos before showing Paul came to Ephesus, keeping the previous story in view. Then, Luke says Paul "found some disciples" in Ephesus. I think the phrasing is intentional. Luke has exclusively used the term "disciples" for believers in Acts, but "some" carries the idea of particular disciples, leading us to ask, Are they really believers? Luke, then, quickly reveals something is amiss. Look at verse 2, "And he said to them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?'" Pause there. Assuming they have believed in Jesus, Paul promptly asks about them receiving the Spirit, revealing his conviction that the Spirit always accompanies true faith. Pay attention to the tension in verses 2-3, "And they said, 'No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.' And he said, 'Into what then were you baptized?' They said, 'Into John's baptism.'" This is our story's problem, connected to Apollos' problem but heightened in concern, as these disciples say they haven't even heard of the Spirit before we discover they were baptized "Into John's baptism." Like Apollos, they had responded to John's message but had not moved beyond his ministry. Here's a question, though. Have they really never heard of the Spirit? In Luke 3:16, John says, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." If John spoke of the Spirit, they had to have heard of the Spirit. So what do they mean in their answer to Paul's question, then? They have not heard of the Spirit's arrival. They are unaware the Spirit has been poured out on God's people and Ezekiel 36 has been fulfilled. Notice what happens next in verse 4, "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.'" Paul's final statement here is the heightened climax to both story's problems. Knowing he is speaking to those who responded to John's baptism, we should hear him saying, "You are right to have believed John's message of repentance to prepare for one to come after him that would save God's people and usher in the new covenant. But you need to believe all of John's message. That the Messiah is Jesus of Nazareth, meaning the kingdom of God is here and the promised Spirit has been given." They wisely repented in light of John's message to prepare for the Messiah, but they had not turned to Jesus as their Savior. Church, this is the distilled truth of the gospel. Partial and preparatory repentance was not enough. They needed to go deeper. They needed to repent of allegiance anything other than Christ, turning from self and all that is in the world, even good earthly teachers, to turn to Jesus. They needed to believe in His atoning death and resurrection for their salvation.

They needed to trust in Him alone for access to God's new covenant promises. They believed in messages designed to lead them to Jesus but fell short of true saving faith in Jesus. Pay attention to their response in verse 5, "On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus." The resolution comes quickly. On hearing Jesus was the Messiah John spoke of, they were baptized in His name. For Luke, "the name of the Lord Jesus" points to Jesus' power and authority as the Christ. So, he isn't giving a particular formulaic pattern of water baptism, or suggesting baptism was salvific. He is connecting their baptism to their transformed allegiance and indicating what it meant. Water baptism is an outward sign of an inward reality. Titus 3:4-7 says, "when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior." Notice how Paul speaks in terms related to baptism. Yet, the washing isn't with water, but the Holy Spirit. On a side note, I love that word richly. This isn't a light washing, it is a rich outpouring. I love the way Ben Witherington describes our baptism by the Spirit, saying, "The image [of baptism] is of being immersed in the Spirit, surrounded by the Spirit's presence as if it were the very air the Christian breathed" (Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, p.571). This helps us understand baptism as it relates to Christ's saving work. Regeneration and renewal is the change of heart and power. Both come by the outpouring of the Spirit, as He awakens faith and empowers us to live for God. When we trust in Christ for salvation, we are washed with the Spirit, immersed into regeneration and renewal. Baptism by water points to our spiritual baptism by the Spirit. Notice the trailing action in verses 6-7, "And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. There were about twelve men in all." Four things are recorded. (1) Paul lays his hands on them. (2) The Holy Spirit comes on them. (3) They speak in tongues and prophecy. (4) There are twelve men. Do these things sound familiar to you? Each relate to pivotal moments of kingdom expansion in Acts. At Pentecost in Acts 2, the Spirit comes on the disciples in the upper room, leading them to speak in tongues and prophecy. In Acts 8, Peter comes to Samaria to confirm the Samaritan's faith, laying his hands on them before they receive the Spirit. In Acts 10, the Spirit comes upon the Gentiles as they believe and they speak in tongues. Each moment has similarities and differences from our story. What should we make of these things? First, recognize there is no formula for how the Spirit falls. He comes separate from baptism, and with baptism. Through the laying on of hands, and without. Second, recognize the gift of tongues doesn't always accompany the Spirit's activity. Third, note the importance of each moment. Salvation comes to people in Jerusalem through Peter's message in Acts 2, to Samaria through Philip's teaching and Peter's confirmation in Acts 8, and to the Gentiles through Peter's message in Acts 10. This fulfills Jesus' promise in Acts 1:8. Each serve as transitional moments in kingdom expansion, as we see Peter witnessing to Jesus from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. Our passage is another transitional moment as true saving faith comes to John's disciples with Paul as the primary witness now. This tells us something unique is happening here as well, describing a special activity of the Spirit to attest to kingdom expansion, not a normative practice. Luke's main point is not in the particular manifestations of the Spirit of speaking in tongues and prophecy, but the clearly visible outpouring of the Spirit on John's disciples as they turn to trust in Jesus through Paul's message. Why is this important? I believe there are two reasons. First, within early Jewish Christian circles, there was a "John-the-Baptist sect" that had no genuine commitment to Jesus. Second, a significant public activity of the Spirit legitimized the recipients as God's new covenant people. Those who responded to John's Baptism of repentance were a transitional people who still needed faith in Christ to enter the new covenant community. The Spirit coming upon these men, as He had the apostles, Samaritans, and Gentiles confirmed that need. As the fifth time in Acts Luke has clarified John's role as pointing to Jesus, and John's disciples turning in faith, he is likely addressing that group. That there were twelve may have symbolic significance but we shouldn't press that too much.

The main point is to confirm that true saving faith must be in the power and authority of Jesus and is always accompanied by receiving the Spirit. We must receive the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Spirit that only comes through true and genuine faith. As we come to a close, I want to suggest four components of necessary gospel clarity from the stories over the last two weeks. First,

### **1) Christ's Cleansing Power is Central**

Both stories focus on those who knew only John's baptism, which was a ceremonial act of cleansing. Each story communicates the importance of knowing what John's baptism pointed to. In Isaiah 40, God declared one would cry out in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord. In John 1:23, John the Baptist told the priests and Levites he was that voice in the wilderness. Then, in John 1:29-34, we read, "The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, "After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me." I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.' And John bore witness: 'I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.'" There is no mistaking who Jesus is proclaimed to be. He is "the Son of God" and "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" How does He take away sin? Through His cleansing power. Church, it is not enough to believe Jesus is someone worth following, you must believe He cleanses you from sin, "by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit." Second,

### **2) Faith Trusts that God is Merciful**

Both stories speak to denying any work of ours for salvation. Apollos was a gifted man who could have trusted in his abilities, yet he received instruction for gospel clarity. The disciples in Ephesus trusted in their act of following John's baptism of repentance but had not turned to Jesus. This doesn't mean their response wasn't genuine and important, but they needed a deeper work of God. Look at Titus 3:4-7 again, "he [God] saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life." Family, faith never trusts in any work done by us, but only that God is merciful to wash and justify by His grace alone. Third,

### **3) Baptism is Powerfully Meaningful**

Consider again the immediate response of John the Baptist's disciples, "On hearing [Jesus was the Messiah], they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus." We never see any hesitation to be baptized in Acts. Family, the early church displays an understanding of baptism that I think the church today has lost. While it is not salvific, it is deeply symbolic of the internal and spiritual act God has performed. Therefore, it is powerfully meaningful. Many of God's internal and spiritual acts have physical expressions. His sanctifying work is expressed in real change. His spiritual church has local expressions. Even the hope, peace, and love He pours out in our hearts are often physically felt in our lives. Baptism is commanded because of its relationship to the internal and spiritual reality of what Christ has done. If you haven't walked forward in this powerfully meaningful act, see another example of immediate response calling you to move forward in faith. Finally,

### **4) The Spirit's Activity is Essential**

We cannot miss how the whole story hinges on our need of the Spirit. Paul's initial question is about the Spirit and his actions after their baptism shows the Spirit's presence and activity. Romans 8:14-16 says, "all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God... The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God." I can't help but wonder if we have devalued the gift of the Spirit in the church today, and believe Kent Hughes is spot on when saying, "The church today needs a new appropriation of the vitality and life of the Spirit of God" (R. Kent Hughes, Acts—The Church Afire, p. 252).

Family, the Spirit's activity is essential for every believer. He convicts of sin, awakes affections for Christ, and seals us for the day of redemption. He works in us to produce fruit and through us to serve others with spiritual gifts. Fruit, Paul says in Galatians 5:22-23, that "is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." Gifts, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:7, are given to each of us as, "the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." That is not His only work. Paul says the Spirit intercedes for us in Romans 8:26, we can grieve the Spirit in Ephesians 4:30 and quench the Spirit in 1 Thessalonians 5:19. The presence and activity of the Spirit is essential, and we should desire more of His work in our lives.

**Conclusion:**

As the worship team is coming to lead us in a time of reflection and response, the call of God in our passage is to believe in these truths and to walk forward in faith because of them. Reflect on each of them to see where you may need gospel clarity and how God is calling you to press into His grace today. Pray with me as we prepare to respond together.