

3. Paul in Ephesus (19:1–41)

While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior (or ‘made his way overland’, JB) and arrived at Ephesus (1), keeping his promise to return if God willed it (18:21). It was, therefore, during Paul’s year of absence from Ephesus that Apollos came, ministered and left again.

a. Paul and John the Baptist’s followers (19:1b–7)

On arrival in Ephesus Paul found some disciples. At least, that is what they claimed to be. In reality, however, they were disciples of John the Baptist, and were decidedly less well informed than Apollos had been. Luke records the dialogue which developed between them (2–4) and its sequel (5–7).

Paul’s first question: ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?’

Their answer: ‘No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.’

Paul’s second question: ‘Then what baptism did you receive?’

Their answer: ‘John’s baptism.’

Paul’s comment: ‘John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.’

⁵On hearing this, they were baptised into the name of the Lord Jesus. ⁶When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.

⁷There were about twelve men in all.

This incident has become a proof text in some pentecostal and charismatic circles, especially when the inaccurate and unwarranted AV translation of verse 2 is followed, namely ‘Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed?’ From this it is sometimes argued that Christian initiation is in two stages, beginning with faith and conversion, and followed later by receiving the Holy Spirit. But those twelve ‘disciples’ cannot possibly be regarded as providing a norm for a two-stage initiation. On the contrary, as Michael Green has written, it is ‘crystal clear that these disciples were in no sense Christians’,³⁹ having not yet believed in Jesus, whereas through the ministry of Paul they came to believe and were then baptized with water and the Spirit more or less simulta-

³⁹ Green, *I believe in the Holy Spirit*, p. 135.

neously.

When Paul first met them, he assumed that they were believers, but noticed that they gave no evidence in their bearing or behaviour of the indwelling of the [Holy Spirit](#). So he asked them his two leading questions, whether they had received the Spirit when they believed, and into what they had been baptized. His first question linked the Spirit with faith, and his second with baptism. That is, his questions expressed his assumptions that those who have believed have received the Spirit,⁴⁰ and that those who have been baptized have received the Spirit, for he cannot separate the sign (water) from the thing signified (the Spirit). He took it for granted that baptized believers receive the Spirit, as Peter also taught (2:38–39). Both his questions imply that to have believed and been baptized and not to have received the Spirit constitutes an extraordinary anomaly.

Consider now the answers which Paul received to his questions. In answer to his first, they said that they had ‘not even heard that there is a [Holy Spirit](#)’. This cannot mean that they had never heard of the Spirit at all, for he is referred to many times in the Old Testament, and John the Baptist spoke of the Messiah as baptizing people with the Spirit. It must rather mean that, although they had heard John’s prophecy, they had not heard whether it had been fulfilled. They were ignorant of Pentecost. In answer to Paul’s second question, they explained that they had received John’s baptism, not Christian baptism. In a word, they were still living in the Old Testament which culminated 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.

Once they came to understand this through Paul’s instruction, they put their trust in [Jesus](#) of whose coming their teacher John the Baptist had spoken. They were then baptized into Christ, Paul laid his hands on them (giving his apostolic imprimatur to what was happening, as Peter and John had done in Samaria), the [Holy Spirit](#) came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. In other words, 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.

The norm of Christian experience, then, is a cluster of four things: repentance, faith

⁴⁰ Cf. [Gal. 3:2](#).

in Jesus, water baptism and the gift of the Spirit. Though the perceived order may vary a little, the four belong together and are universal in Christian initiation ⁴¹. The laying-on of apostolic hands, however, together with tongue-speaking and prophesying, were special to Ephesus, as to Samaria, in order to demonstrate visibly and publicly that particular groups were incorporated into Christ by the Spirit ⁴²; the New Testament does not universalize them. There are no Samaritans or disciples of John the Baptist left in the world today.

b. Synagogue and lecture hall (19:8–10)

The pattern of Paul's evangelistic ministry in Ephesus was similar to that in Corinth. First, *Paul entered the synagogue*, where he was already known (18:19), *and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively* (RSV, 'arguing and pleading') *about the kingdom of God* (8). To argue from the Old Testament Scriptures about the kingdom is the same as to argue that Jesus is the Christ, since it is Jesus the Christ who inaugurated the kingdom (cf. 28:31). *But*, as in Corinth so in Ephesus, the Jewish people rejected the good news: *some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way*, as Christian discipleship is again called,⁴¹ since 'Christianity was for the disciples the way of all ways ... in which to walk.'⁴² As a direct result of this stubborn opposition in the synagogue, *Paul left them*. He also *took the disciples with him and had discussions* (*dialegomenos*; RSV, 'argued') *daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus* (9). In fact this new outreach to the Gentiles in the form of dialogue evangelism *went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord* (10). It is a bit tantalizing that Luke tells us nothing about Tyrannus. One assumes that he was a

⁴¹ Cf. Acts 9:2; 19:23; 22:4; 24:14, 22.

⁴² Williams, p. 122. It is interesting that Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Judaism and Islam all in differing degrees use the imagery of the 'way' or the 'path'. In the Bible too we are confronted by too ways between which to choose, usually between life and death (e.g. Dt. 30:19ff.; Ps. 1; Pr. 2; Mt. 7:13–14). The Qumran community was also familiar with this alternative. But the six occurrences of 'the way' in Acts are all unqualified. The origin of this absolute use is not known. It may go back to Jesus' claim to be the only way to the Father (Jn. 14:6; cf. Acts 4:12; 16:17) or it may be declaring that to follow Christ is a uniquely adventurous journey.

philosopher or educator of some kind, who lectured during the cool hours of the morning, but was prepared to rent his school room or lecture hall (*scholē*) to the Christian evangelist during the heat of the day. Since *tyrannos* means a despot or tyrant, 'one wonders idly if this was the name his parents gave him or the name his pupils gave him!'⁴³ What is clear is that Paul's daily Christian lecturing for two years led to the evangelization of the whole province.

c. Some power encounters (19:11–20)

In Corinth Christ encouraged his apostle and endorsed his teaching through a night vision; in Ephesus through signs and wonders by which Christ's power over disease, demon-possession and magic was demonstrated. *God did extraordinary miracles through Paul (11). Handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him* ('the sweat-rags being used for tying round his head and the aprons for tying round his waist' while he was engaged in his tentmaking)⁴⁴ *were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them (12)*. Liberal commentators are embarrassed by these verses and tend to dismiss them as legendary. At least four points may be made on the other side. First, Luke himself is not content to describe these events as mere 'miracles', *dynameis*, demonstrations of divine power; he adds the adjective *tychousas*, which is variously translated 'special' (AV), 'singular' (NEB), 'remarkable' (JB) and 'extraordinary' (RSV, NIV). He does not regard them as typical, even for 'miracles'. Secondly, he does not regard them as magic either, for he sets them apart from the magical practices which Ephesian believers were soon to confess and renounce as evil (18–19). Thirdly, the wisest attitude to the sweat-rag miracles is neither that of the sceptics who declare them spurious, nor that of the mimics, who try to copy them, like those American televangelists who offer to send to the sick handkerchiefs which they have blessed, but rather that of Bible students who remember both that Paul regarded his miracles as his apostolic credentials⁴⁵ and that Jesus himself condescended to the timorous faith of a woman by healing her when she touched the edge of his cloak.⁴⁶ Fourthly, as in the Gospels so in the Acts, demon-pos-

⁴³ Bruce, *English*, p. 388, f.n. 18.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 389.

⁴⁵ E.g. 2 Cor. 12:12; Rom. 15:19.

⁴⁶ Lk. 8:43–44.

session is distinguished from illness, and therefore exorcism from healing.

The mention of exorcism leads Luke to tell of some Jewish exorcists, who attempted to tap the power they believed to inhere in the name of Jesus, with disastrous consequences: *Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, 'In the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out' (13). Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, meaning probably that he belonged to a high-priestly family, were doing this (14). The evil spirit answered them, 'Jesus I know and I know about Paul, but who are you?' (15). Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding (16).* To be sure, there is power—saving and healing power—in the name of Jesus, as Luke has been at pains to illustrate (e.g. 3:6, 16; 4:10–12). But its efficacy is not mechanical, nor can people use it second-hand. Nevertheless, in spite of this misuse of the Name, the incident had a wholesome effect. *When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear (NEB, 'awestruck'), and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honour (17).*

The power encounter of Jesus with the kingdom of Satan was not yet complete. After healing and exorcism came deliverance from occult practices. *Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds (18). A number who had practised sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas (19),* the drachma being a silver coin representing about a day's wage. We have already noted that Ephesus was famous for its 'Ephesian letters' (*grammata*), which were 'written charms, amulets and talismans'.⁴⁷ That these young believers, instead of realizing the monetary value of their magic spells by selling them, were willing to throw them on a bonfire, was signal evidence of the genuineness of their conversion. Their example also led to more conversions, for *in this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power (20).*

d. Paul's future plans (19:21–22)

After all this had happened, after the synagogue and lecture-hall evangelism and the power encounters, but before the riot in the theatre, Paul decided to go to Jerusalem, first

⁴⁷ Alexander, II, p. 200.

passing through Macedonia and Achaia (21a). Luke does not add at this stage the reason for this circuitous route, but we know that he was going to pick up the offering which he had been urging the Christians of Northern and Southern Greece to collect for their poverty-stricken sisters and brothers in Judea.⁴⁸ His eyes were not on Jerusalem, however. ‘After I have been there,’ he said, ‘I must visit Rome also’ (21b), and beyond that he was even dreaming of Spain,⁴⁹ ‘the most westerly outpost of Roman civilization in Europe’.⁵⁰ His vision had no limits. As Bengel rightly commented, ‘no Alexander, no Caesar, no other hero, approaches to the large-mindedness of this *little* (a play on his name *Paulos*, “little”) Benjamite’.⁵¹ Meanwhile, *he sent two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, ahead of him to Macedonia*, presumably in order to make last-minute preparations for the offering, *while he stayed in the province of Asia*, indeed in Ephesus itself, *a little longer (22)*, because ‘a great door for affective work’ had opened before him, and many were opposing him.⁵² Both the opportunity and the opposition necessitated his continued presence in Ephesus.

⁴⁸ See Acts 24:17; Rom. 15:25ff.; 1 Cor. 16:1–8; 2 Cor. 8–9.

⁴⁹ Rom. 15:24, 28.

⁵⁰ Bruce, *English*, p. 394.

⁵¹ Bengel, p. 681.

⁵² 1 Cor. 16:8–9.