

The Significance Of Paul's Ministry Practice in Acts 19:1-6



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The book of Acts is strategically brilliant. It exists to solve all salvation doctrine issues. The passage of Acts 19:1-7 is one of the most profound passages in the New Testament. It provides powerful doctrinal content relative to the Christian plan of salvation. It is one of those five important places in the book of Acts* that especially reveal the tenets of Christian salvation because they showcase actual conversions taking place. This particular event occurred on Paul's third missionary journey at Ephesus in Asia Minor. The Church at Ephesus was founded on this evangelistic outreach. This incident provides valuable doctrinal content for those interested in identifying the plan of salvation.

These folks at Ephesus were *believers in Christ*.

When Paul met the dozen people covered in this passage, he found that they were already believers in Christ. In the context, they are called "disciples". Notice that Paul did not tell them about Jesus being the Lord and Savior. They already believed that. But he did ask them two questions that would provide a marker for their knowledge and experience relative to Christ. These two questions had to do with the tenets of salvation enjoined on the Day of Pentecost, namely, baptism and receiving the Holy Ghost (Acts 2:38-39).

And, these people had been believers in Christ *for a long time!* Bible commentators say they had been disciples for at least twenty years. But, actually, the time factor had nothing to do with the need Paul felt to ask these two questions. The questions apply regardless of the amount of time a person has believed in Christ. This passage reveals that every believer in Christ is subject to the same two questions. That's because the subject matter of water and Spirit baptism is a requirement for everyone, which is exactly how Peter expressed it on the Day of Pentecost.

This is Paul!

It must be shocking to some people that we find the Apostle Paul, a man who was precise and rigid in doctrinal matters, confronting these believers in Christ about

certain Christian tenets associated with salvation. And this occurred immediately upon meeting them. We see Peter doing that on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:38) and at the household of Cornelius (Acts 10:43-48). But, *Paul*, too?! What doctrinal message does this send about salvation doctrine from a Pauline perspective?

Some people think, with no biblical basis, that Paul preached a different salvation message than Peter did in Acts 2:38. They think his message involved some mere faith in Jesus that didn't require any salvific tenets. At these times, they usually refer to his *justification by faith* theology expressed in his epistles. What they often do not understand is that Paul did not differ from Peter one iota. Paul himself said his message was in perfect agreement with Peter's (Galatians 2:1-9). And we know his own conversion experience was identical to what Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost. He repented on the Damascus Road, was later baptized in Jesus' name (Acts 9:18; 22:16), and received the Holy Ghost (Acts 9:17). Incidentally, it could not have been any other way. The New Testament only teaches one Christian plan of salvation, which Peter and Paul both asserted (Acts 2:38-39; Ephesians 4:5). And, by the way, had Peter theologized the Acts 2:38 salvation experience in his epistles, he would have expressed it the same way as did Paul, as *justification by faith*. He did so essentially in Acts 10:43, which, in his message to Cornelius, was leading up to baptism in Jesus' name.

What we see of Paul's ministry practice here in Acts 19 collides with the false view many have of his *justification by faith* theology, which they mistakenly think means that salvation occurs by simple faith in Christ without any necessary tenets of salvation, such as baptism. If that were the case, Paul would not have confronted the disciples at Ephesus as he did. Instead, he would have immediately recognized the sufficiency of their current faith and would have rejoiced with them in their common salvation. But the context of Acts 19 reveals something different. It shows us what justification by faith meant to Paul *practically*, namely, that salvation comes through faith in Christ, as opposed to any other means, but, *according to the redemption He alone has provided* (Romans 3:24). And, the redemption Christ provided is appropriated by the means He prescribed in His Great Commission, which involve repentance, baptism in Jesus' name, and receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost**.

Re-baptism!

It's amazing that we find persons in the New Testament baptized more than once—especially at the hands of Paul, who, as we said earlier, was no trifler in doctrine and only insisted on what is indeed a matter of true faith. For Paul to re-baptize these disciples has profound doctrinal significance, then. Hardly anything affirms the necessity of Christian baptism more. It is seen to supersede the baptism that came by the authority of John the Baptist, which was necessary in its time (Luke 7:28-30). Therefore, the baptism that replaced John's cannot be less vital. And this is understandable when we consider that baptism is revealed to be for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38). That was the matter of Paul's own introduction to baptism when he received the Gospel from Ananias (Acts 22:16). Accordingly, Jesus and Peter expressly stated that baptism saves (Mark 16:16; 1Peter 3:21). These facts of baptism, then, were Apostolic doctrine from the beginning of the Christian era. Hence, we have Paul's understanding of salvation doctrine springing into action here in Acts 19.

Had Paul instead believed that faith in Jesus without salvific tenets was sufficient for salvation, he would never have asked the believers in Ephesus the two questions that he did. Rather, he would have immediately embraced their Christian fellowship. But, of course, that's not how the scenario played out. Unquestionably, the simple narrative of Acts 19 exists to show the necessity of Christian salvation tenets, even among people of faith in Christ. That need would continue to exist throughout the Church age, making Acts 19 relevant even to the present. And, given all the misinterpretation in our day of Paul's salvation theology, we should feel its message punctuated by the fact that it involved Paul.

Because of the precedent of Acts 19, Paul's two questions still apply today to anyone who believes in Jesus. And the precise outcome of Acts 19, involving Christian baptism and receiving the Holy Ghost, are set forth as what is to be experienced by all. Christian faith for one is Christian faith for all. If these believers in Ephesus needed the further experience introduced to them by Paul, then so does everyone else who lacks them. This biblical example does not exist in vain but for the purpose of leading all believers to the same end. Paul declared elsewhere that God would have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1Timothy 2:4).

Someone may try to suggest that Paul's double inquiry was not a denial of the Ephesian believers' previous faith experience being adequate for salvation in the Christian era but was simply a promotion of additional, howbeit, unnecessary,

experience in Christ. That position is untenable since both tenets introduced by Paul are necessary for salvation— remission of sins, which comes through baptism, and receiving the Holy Ghost (Romans 8:9). And both were faithfully preached since the Day of Pentecost. But, even without insisting on that point, the passage of Acts 19 by itself still maintains that all believers are to receive Christian baptism and the Holy Ghost since that is why the Ephesians were confronted. Every preacher, then, should follow Paul's example of evangelism and insist on these tenets being experienced by his hearers. And every believer hearing of them should receive the Acts 2:38 experience as these did at Ephesus. The import of this passage involving evangelism by Paul cannot be dismissed. It demonstrates his salvation theology. He believed firmly in what was preached since the Day of Pentecost.

Like a drama, Acts 19:1-7 has a confrontational component about it when the believers at Ephesus were met with new revelation. But it is resolved in verses 4 to 6 by them heeding the Apostolic messenger. Verse 7 concludes the passage by giving the number of persons affected, bringing the conflict to rest. To describe the passage in this way is not out of line. Many people have experienced this same drama play out in their own faith journey. I certainly have. I always believed in Christ but was confronted with the truth about salvation by a faithful Apostolic witness, for which I am forever grateful. And, by the grace of God, I resolved the issue in the same way the Ephesian believers did. This is why Acts 19 exists— to help people of faith. And, the result achieved by Paul at Ephesus should always be the outcome, especially when both tenets of faith are so important and are readily available. It's not hard to be re-baptized and the Holy Ghost is a gift. It's never hard to receive a gift.

Paul's insistence on re-baptism leads us to the obvious question: What is the difference in the two baptisms?

Pre-eminence and necessity of the name of Jesus stands out.

The *act* of baptism was the same in both John's baptism and Paul's. But the qualifying difference between John's and Christian baptism was patently in the use of the saving name of Jesus, which was enjoined on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:38). Since that time, all New Testament baptisms were administered in Jesus' name. Therefore, John's baptism would be insufficient in the Christian era due to the exclusive New Covenant terms.

Paul's re-baptism of the disciples at Ephesus should convince any reasonable person that baptism must be performed in the name of Jesus. Here is Apostolic authority for re-baptizing anyone who is not baptized in Jesus' name. We are told in Scripture that there is no other saving name under heaven (Acts 4:12) and that all things are to be done in the name of Jesus (Colossians 3:17).

Baptism, as the necessary means to employ the saving name of Jesus

Baptism is the means whereby the name of Jesus is applied salvifically. It fulfills the prophetic *calling on the name of the Lord* for salvation, as prophesied by Joel (2:32). Paul's own conversion experience clearly points that out (Acts 22:16). It comports with the necessary use of the name of Jesus for salvation as stated by Peter (Acts 4:12). Baptism in Jesus' name is the only salvific use of the name of Jesus in the Christian era. And, again, it is easy to understand how it is associated with salvation. It effects the remission of sins, a condition, without which, no one can be saved.

The necessity of receiving the Holy Ghost

There were so many times in Jesus' ministry when He stressed the importance of receiving the Holy Ghost. He did so early on, all the way to His post-resurrection visits with the Apostles***. John the Baptist referred to Christ as the Spirit Baptizer (Matthew 3:11). That implied that everyone truly affected by Christ's ministry would receive His Spirit. Jesus said so much Himself (John 3:5; 4:10; 7:37-39). Paul referred to the Christian era as the dispensation of the Spirit (2Corinthians 3:8), indicating that Christianity is about life in the Spirit. He even went so far as to say that a person without the Spirit is not a Christian (Romans 8:9). This is why Paul so promptly pressed the issue with the Ephesian believers.

Most people today do not deny the necessity of receiving the Holy Ghost. The contemporary point of contention, however, is how and when a person receives it. The context of Acts 19, as with the other instances in Acts where the Holy Ghost was poured out, provide certainty as to how a person can know he has been filled with the Spirit.

First of all, it must be pointed out that the Holy Ghost is immaterial so there is no way to see it or feel it coming in. So the Bible must give us some other means. Secondly,

the Spirit does not just automatically come into a person the moment he believes or is baptized. That is certain from this passage and every other one in Acts where the Spirit was received. Therefore, since the reception of the Holy Ghost cannot be detected by natural means nor be assumed upon by faith or baptism, how does a person know when he receives it? That question is clearly answered by the evidence provided in the book of Acts in the numerous instances when people received it— they spoke in other tongues. This is how the Apostles settled upon the fact that someone had been so filled. It is evident here in Acts 19 and also highly conspicuous in Acts 10:46. It is the explanation from prophecy that Peter gave on the Day of Pentecost to those who were perplexed by the Apostles and others speaking in tongues (Acts 2:11-18). The biblical examples of people receiving the Holy Ghost provide no other evidence by which to claim the Spirit.

Conclusion

Acts 19:1-7 is one of many places in Scripture that showcases Christian salvation. The tenets enacted on the Day of Pentecost regarding baptism in Jesus' name and the reception of the Holy Ghost are highly apparent in it. It is a peculiarly pertinent passage because it confronts each believer with the two most important questions that could be asked him. It effectively brings people of faith face to face with Acts 2:38. It, thereby, bombards faith in Christ with the inalienable *covenant terms of faith*. It taps on the consciousness of believers to take notice of the blood-bought tenets of salvation— baptism, which brings remission of sins, and receiving Christ's Spirit (John 16:7). It is the Mount Carmel of the New Testament, emphasizing in a dramatic way the Christian plan of salvation over that which is insufficient in the Christian era. That is necessary because partial truth presented as the full truth presents a very precarious and subtle danger to salvation.

* Acts 2:38-39; 8:12-18; 9:17-18 w/ 22:16; 10:44-48; 19:1-7

** See the full-orbed Great Commission by combining the four Gospel accounts in John 20:21-23; Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:45-49.

*** John 3:5; 4:10; 7:37-39; 14:16-18; 16:7,13; 20:22; Acts 1:8

