

January 7, 2024: "Not Just Half, but Whole"

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Scripture: Acts 19:1-7

1 "While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. 2 He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." 3 Then he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism." 4 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, in Jesus." 5 On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 6 When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied— 7 altogether there were about twelve of them."

Two men were adrift on a raft in the open sea, and it looked bad for them. Finally, one of them, frightened, began to pray: "O Lord, I've broken most of the commandments. I've got some pretty bad habits – I drink, I curse, I steal, I treat people like dirt. But if my life is spared now, I promise you that I'll change, that I'll never curse again, that I," Suddenly his friend cried out to him: "Wait, Pete. Don't go too far. I think I see another ship?"

It's hard giving one's whole self to God, To be a complete Christian, especially when our wants are great, when our pride outweighs our humility, when we feel scared or threatened, when we feel invisible, when we feel our principles are ignored or threatened. The choice to take matters into our own hands instead of turning to God for guidance and handling matters as Jesus would have us do, is not always a conscious decision people make, but a subconscious decision.

We've been witnessing this far too much socially and politically, with horrifying results, and creating fear for the future. The larger issues we see emerging in our nation and world, really begin within each person and his or her decision, each person's choice whether or not to have a relationship with Christ, and how much of a relationship one allows him or her-self to have with Christ.

Today's scripture and message, quite honestly, like every scripture and message, directs our attention to the answers we need for living together as God's children, in our homes, our neighborhoods, our jobs, our churches, even our political affairs, as complete Christian's. With that in mind, let us see what God has for us in today's word.

As we begin our study of today's scripture reading, we find in verse one the mentioning of a man named Apollos and the fact that he was in Corinth. Without looking back to the story in chapter 18, this information means little to us. So, I want us to look at some of the story we find in Chapter 18; because as it turns out, it helps us to understand something about the disciples that Paul was addressing.

Who was Apollos? Apollos was from Alexandria in Egypt which was the second most important city in the Roman empire. There was a huge population of Jews in that city. Apollos was a gifted and persuasive preacher and defender of the Old Testament.

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In addition to being well versed in the Old Testament, he had the knowledge of Christ which he learned from hearing John the Baptist's message. The message of John focused primarily on the repentance from sin, the call to baptism and the announcement of Jesus' coming.

The scriptures tell us that Apollos had gone to Ephesus and was preaching and teaching accurately about what he heard John say about Jesus; however, his message was limited as he knew only the baptism of John. What does that mean? It means that Apollos understood the need for repentance, but he had not learned of the need to believe in Christ. Apollos did not know about Jesus' life, crucifixion, and resurrection. Nor did he know about the coming of the Holy Spirit.

That day as Apollos spoke in the synagogue, Priscilla and Aquila, close friends of the Apostle Paul and ministers in the early church, were listening to him and they realized Apollos needed to know more about Jesus and the Holy Spirit. When Apollos finished speaking, they invited him to their home and explained the way of salvation to him. With this new understanding and, most assuredly, with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, Apollos went on to share the Gospel message and became a great debater, proving through the use of the scriptures that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

Here then, in Chapter 19, today's scripture reading, we find that Apollos moved on to Corinth and the Apostle Paul arrived in Ephesus. It is believed Paul stayed in Ephesus for about two years. In today's story, we find that Paul encountered a group of disciples, and he asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" They did not know what Paul was talking about because like Apollos, they only knew the messages John shared, and which very likely, Apollos passed on to them in his teaching before his complete understanding of the Gospel.

They knew John's baptism was a sign of repentance from sin only, not a sign of new life in Christ. They believed Jesus was the Messiah, but they did not understand the significance of Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection; nor did they know about the outpouring and work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. Paul goes on to teach them about what it means to believe in Jesus and about the power of the Holy Spirit, and they believed. Paul then baptized them and after baptizing them he placed his hands on them and prayed for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to be upon them. The Holy Spirit then indeed did fill them, and they began to speak in tongues and prophecy.

Our focus on this text might zero in on the fact that these disciples, twelve of them, received the power to speak in tongues and to prophecy, simply because many are fascinated with these abilities given by the Spirit. However, the highlight of this story is not on these gifts, but instead there's a much deeper message for us, a more important message that we need to hear. Actually, there are two parts to this message.

The first part of the message we need to hear comes out of the disciples' response to Paul's question, "With what, then, were you baptized?" They answered saying, "With the baptism of John." The preaching of John was a threat, a call to repentance symbolized through

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the act of baptism. John knew that he was not the one who would save the people. He knew he was only the one who was chosen by God to point the way to one greater than he, Jesus.

John's call of repentance was merely step one of two in the religious life. The call to repentance challenges us to awaken to our own failures and our deserving of condemnation at the hands of God. But repentance is more than recognizing and voicing our failures, and asking for forgiveness. Going hand-in-hand with this step is a sincere effort by us to do better, to avoid making the same mistakes and endeavoring to keep from falling into new sinful ways. Repentance then requires more than simply saying we are sorry for our sins. Despite our own best efforts, we inevitably fail to keep from sinning. That's why we need the second step in this message. There is help and hope for us.

The second step in this message that we need to hear rises out of two things Paul said. First the question, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" And then his response to their answer, he said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." They then believed and were baptized with the baptism of Jesus.

What's the difference between the baptism of John and the baptism of Jesus, you might ask? Let me read to you the account of Jesus' baptism from Mark 1:9-11, "*In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."* What happened after Jesus was baptized? The Holy Spirit descended upon him.

Another story found in Acts regarding the day of Pentecost speaks of the Apostles and other followers with them and the baptism they received. We read there, "When the day of Pentecost came, the Apostles were all together in one place. It was ten days after Jesus had gone back to heaven. Before he had left them, He had made a promise.

"The Holy Spirit will come to you. He will give you power to tell people about me."

For ten days, the Apostles and some other followers of Jesus had stayed together, praying and waiting. But now the great day had come! Suddenly, a noise like a strong wind filled the whole house and the followers saw something that looked like flames of fire, falling on each person there. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they began to speak different languages." Later that day, 3,000 more people received the baptism of Jesus and out of that, the church was born.

The difference then is that with the baptism of Jesus, the Holy Spirit moves into your heart, soul and mind. The Holy Spirit comes upon us as a blessing of God. The practice in the Church of the Brethren is that after a candidate is baptized by immersion, the pastor lays hands on the newly baptized person and prays for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit on God's beloved child.

So, you see, the baptism of Jesus comes then when we see that through the grace of Jesus, which we receive because of his sacrificial death for us and his glorious resurrection, that all our sins are erased. The Holy Spirit awakens us to the reality that all our efforts to do better are

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strengthened only by the work of the Holy Spirit through us. With the indwelling of the Spirit, we can do what we could never do ourselves.

The disciples in today's scripture reading knew they were sinners, and they knew they needed to do better; but they did not know about the grace of Jesus Christ and the help of the Holy Spirit available to them. They were not complete Christians. Their Christian walk was always a struggle mixed with feelings of success and failure, but never did they have a real sense of peace.

Yes, admittedly, our Christian walk can be full of ups and downs. But when we are willing to leave behind our need for total control of our lives to become complete Christians, fulfilled through our baptism in Christ, we can find inner peace because of God's loving grace provided for us through Jesus. This story teaches us that without the Holy Spirit, we cannot be a complete Christian. Even when we see the error of our ways and repent and determine to change them, we can never make the change without the help which the Spirit alone can give.

Soon after a family moved into their new house, it began to show the effects of their slipshod lifestyle. The yard was littered with trash. The lawn withered for lack of care, and, even when replanted, died out again. To enter this house was to enter a shambles. It was never clean or in order.

Another family eventually bought the house and moved in. They painted the house, cleaned up the yard, and replanted the lawn. The results were completely different. What had happened? There was a dramatic improvement in the appearance of the house because there was a change in those who lived in that house.

In the same way, it is impossible that there not be a change in a person's life once he or she becomes a complete Christian – because there is a perfect new resident within, the Holy Spirit.

To be a complete Christian, or not to be. That is the question. The choice is whether it's nobler in your mind to rely only on your own efforts to live the Christian life, and suffer with inner anguish day after day; or to put your trust and confidence in the power of the Holy Spirit every day, assuring you that you are forgiven and free, and guided by the Spirit to become whole in Christ. Once again, it's really all up to you. Amen.