

Acts 19:2

Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?

When I was at primary school I had to do a piece of homework compiling this list:

- The Great Pyramid of Egypt
- The Mausoleum at Halicarnassus
- The Statue of Zeus at Olympia
- The Colossus of Rhodes
- The Great Lighthouse at Alexandria
- The Hanging Gardens of Babylon
- The Temple of Artemis at Ephesus

It is, of course, a list of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World

- The Temple of Artemis at Ephesus
- The great engineer and mathematician, Philon of Byzantium, wrote

“I have seen the walls and Hanging Gardens of ancient Babylon,” wrote Philon of Byzantium, “the statue of Olympian Zeus, the Colossus of Rhodes, the mighty work of the high Pyramids and the tomb of Mausolus. But when I saw the temple at Ephesus rising to the clouds, all these other wonders were put in the shade.”

The first shrine to the goddess Artemis was probably built around 800 B.C.

- Artemis of the Ephesians, sometimes called Diana
- Is not the same goddess worshipped in Greece (the goddess of hunt)
- But a goddess of fertility
- The earliest temple contained a sacred stone, possibly a meteorite
- And after several rebuildings, each more impressive than the one before
- The temple of Paul’s time was four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens
- completely constructed with marble, fine carvings
- And housed many works of art and bronze statues
- Consequently a big souvenir business grew up around the temple
- And miniature silver Artemis idols in terracotta shrines were sold

In New Testament times, Ephesus on the western coast of Asia Minor (modern Turkey)

- Was the capital city of the newly formed Roman province of Asia
- It was a centre of trade linking the east and west but because of a problem with silt
- That role was diminishing and the pilgrim/tourist trade to the temple was increasing

Despite the fact that Paul was probably in Ephesus for two or three years

- Luke gives us quite a brief summary of his stay in the city
- Which for convenience I divide under three headings

- I THE GOSPEL AND THE SPIRIT
- II THE GOSPEL AND SATAN
- III THE GOSPEL AND SOCIETY

I THE GOSPEL AND THE SPIRIT

When Paul arrived at Ephesus he met some 'disciples' – about twelve men in all

- Reading between the lines it seems that Paul detected they were not all they seemed
- When he asked them if they received the Holy Spirit when they believed
- (interestingly Paul does not specify what they might have believed)
- They answered, 'No.' They had not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.
- They had received the baptism of John – a baptism of repentance
- But Paul said that they should believe in the one coming after John the Baptist
- That is Jesus – and on hearing this they were baptised into the name of the Lord Jesus
- And when Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them
- They spoke in tongues and prophesied

It seems that Paul was working on the assumption that these 'disciples' were truly Christians

- But Paul held true belief and the reception of the Holy Spirit always went together
- Something about these men indicated that one or other of his assumptions was wrong
- Was it the case that not all believers receive the Holy Spirit?
- Or was it the case that they were not really believers at all?

Though the men considered themselves 'disciples' in some sense

- It is possible that they were disciples of John the Baptist
- But not yet disciples of Jesus
- On their acceptance of Jesus, they were baptised into the name of Jesus
- When the baptism of John the Baptist's pointed beyond itself to Jesus (cf. Apollos)
- That was not repeated – but where people had only seen as far as John the Baptist
- So John's baptism could be understood as rivalling commitment to Jesus
- Then on profession of faith they were baptised into the name of the Lord Jesus
- Later, Paul writes to Ephesus about 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism' (Eph. 4:5)

After these men had been baptised, Paul laid hands on them to receive the Holy Spirit

- There are many important questions here that we must address briefly
- Firstly, is it necessary for a believer to be baptised to receive the Holy Spirit?
- I answer, 'no' – it is simply necessary for the believer to believe
- Secondly, is it necessary for a believer to be immersed to receive the Holy Spirit?
- Clearly 'no' – as it is not necessary for a believer to be baptised to receive the Spirit
- Thirdly, is it necessary for a church leader or fellow believer to lay hands on another
- So that the new believer might receive the gift of the Holy Spirit
- And the answer is 'no' but like baptism it is an outward sign of what God is doing
- Fourthly, is there a Christian experience of 'baptism in the Spirit'?
- This is more difficult to answer especially as people get very hot under the collar
- My conviction is that every Christian is baptised in the Spirit at conversion
- But that it is possible for believers to know times of greater blessing
- Sometimes called 'filling with the Spirit' on more than one occasion after conversion
- As I have said before, I don't deny the name/label and I don't deny the experience
- But I am not always sure that people tie the right label on the Christian experience
- Fifthly, is it necessary to speak in tongues or to show some other gift
- as evidence of being baptised in the Spirit (a big question for Pentecostals)
- the answer is it is not necessary either at conversion or at any subsequent blessing

First in the synagogue (three months) and then in the lecture hall (two years)

- Paul argued persuasively about the Kingdom of God
- And had discussions daily about the claims of Christ
- The word of the Lord was heard throughout the province
- And churches were founded in many outlying cities and villages

As the word of God was preached and the work of God flourished

- Some perplexing things happened, among the sick and demon-possessed
- And with those who worshipped at the pagan temple

II THE GOSPEL AND SATAN

Luke rounds off his summary of Paul's Ephesian ministry

- By speaking of 'extraordinary miracles' (direct and indirect healings)
- The account of Paul's handkerchiefs and aprons
- And their being taken to the sick and demon-possessed is difficult to understand
- First we must notice that we cannot be sure that Paul advocated this method
- Ephesus was the home of all sorts of magic and superstition
- And therefore it would not be surprising if people who knew no better
- Began to think that there was some virtue in these pieces of cloth
- Though the virtue lay not in the materials themselves but in the power of God
- There is clearly a parallel with the touching of Jesus' cloak (Luke 8:44)
- And Peter's shadow falling on the sick (Acts 5:15)
- But it seems to me that here again the key factor is the power of God and faith

A similar sort of issue arose with the use of the name of Jesus

- The use of magical names and incantations to exorcise evil spirits
- Was common in the ancient world and apparently prominent at Ephesus
- Jewish magicians were thought to have particularly effective spells
- And it seems that Sceva had styled himself a Jewish Chief Priest
- And that his seven sons would call upon the name of Jesus as a more powerful name
- And as a result found themselves dealing with realities beyond their ability to cope
- So that the demon they were trying to exorcise turned violently on them
- and they fled from the house naked and bleeding
- It is a lesson about misusing the powerful name of Jesus
- and a warning against dabbling in the supernatural

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is his most comprehensive teaching on spiritual warfare

- I preached on this in a big Methodist Church in Lancashire
- And after someone said it was the biggest load of rubbish they had ever heard
- it seems to me that we cannot underestimate the reality of spiritual warfare
- but on the other hand we do not need to be taken in by the extreme things people say
- is there Satanic activity in the world? I would say 'yes'
- do the lives of individuals suffer from demonic oppression or even possession?
- I would guardedly say yes, but suggest that is normally because of occult involvement
- Christian people who suffer from depression can feel awful but it is not demonic
- It is a grave error mistakenly to attribute depression to the demonic

Some years ago there was a great emphasis on teaching about ‘territorial spirits’

- This led earnest Christians to do things like pray on every chair in the church
- Or to hold prayer meetings in the toilets to claim the ground in the name of Jesus
- Such practices need to be held up to scrutiny
- Christians are not to be afraid – the battle is won and Satan is defeated
- Jesus is stronger than Satan and sin/Satan to Jesus must bow
- God does not need our help – we are not commanded to rebuke Satan or his demons
- We are told to put on the full armour of God, to resist evil and to pray
- What we Christians need to display is the power of the transforming love of God
- And nowhere is that seen more clearly than at the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ

We can learn from Ephesus is that the people were rightly overcome with reverential fear

- Negatively, they learned not to misuse the name of Jesus or treat it lightly
- Positively, many people renounced their secret acts of magic
- I used to think that today’s Christians would not be taken in by magic arts
- But now I am not so sure – so I just say that even now you might think of something
- That in your heart of hearts you know is not of Jesus – it’s time to get rid of it!
- At Ephesus, several magicians were converted
- Openly demonstrating the change in their lives
- They brought their magical scrolls together and burned them
- The reason for this is clear enough – they had no more use for them
- And they did not want them to fall into the hands of anyone else
- The current value of these scrolls and spells could be as much as £5 million

Luke comments

“In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.”

Acts 19:20

It is a reminder that the word of the Lord was, as always, primary

We have seen the workings of;

- I THE GOSPEL AND THE SPIRIT
- II THE GOSPEL AND SATAN

And we think also about

- III THE GOSPEL AND SOCIETY

There are those who think that what happens in church is separate from the rest of life

- These are people who say that they are very private about their religion
- The only thing I can seriously say about ‘private religion’
- Is that it is not New Testament Christianity
- For the Christianity of the New Testament was not confined within any walls
- But spilled out into society, challenging the unbelievers
- And causing the believers to be persecuted

At Ephesus people made a decisive break with evil:

Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds.

(Acts 19:18)

The reality is that the gospel of Jesus Christ changes lives

- There was a new pattern of discipleship
- The gospel challenged people about their pagan beliefs and their unbelief in Jesus
- The gospel exposed people in their sin, illuminating the dark corners of their lives
- And people counted not the cost of their passing possessions (which went to the fire)
- But the cost of their disobedience
- The word of Christ in the gospel begins that challenge and continues in our lives

If we have a passing thought that New Testament evangelism was easy but today it is hard

- We must review the word of the scriptures and discover that it is not the case
- Paul said later that he had “fought wild beasts in Ephesus” (1Cor 15:32)
- had “despaired even of life” in the face of “a deadly peril” in Asia (2Cor 1:8-11)
- and that Priscilla and Aquila had “risked their lives” for him (Rom 16:4)
- Paul was guided to go to Jerusalem and on to Rome, visiting churches along the way
- So that he could gather from them a collection for the Christians of Jerusalem
- Consequently, this marks the end of his ministry in the east
- As he thinks about going on to Rome and then to the west

After two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, had gone to Macedonia

- A great disturbance arose about the ‘Way’ (the early name for the Christian church)
- The temple of Artemis was a key to the economic stability of Ephesus
- Not least because of the trade in silver idols of Artemis
- Paul’s preaching had hit them economically – an area where people are often sensitive
- But in the thinking of the pagans it also threatened the honour of the goddess

Soon the whole city was in uproar – spilling out into an attitude of hate

- Fuelled by economics – our trade will lose its good name (19:27)
- Founded on tradition – the temple of the goddess Artemis will be discredited (19:27)
- Thriving on fear – some of the Jews pushed Alexander to the front (19:33)
- Fed by racism – when they realised he was a Jew (19:34)
- Flourishing through ignorance – most of the people didn’t know why they were there

In different contexts there are different things that keep people from the Lordship of Jesus

- Sometimes it is intellectual pride, sometimes it is money
- At Ephesus it was a bondage to the culture of paganism and magic
- The chant, ‘Great is Artemis of the Ephesians’ was sustained for two hours
- But it was not a matter of shouting but a matter of believing
- As one New Testament commentator (Haenchen) perceptively notes
- ‘the only thing heathenism can do against Paul is to shout itself hoarse
- a 1000 years later the residents of Ephesus did not know about the temple
- but 2000 years later the message of Jesus continues to spread