



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Acts 18:18–19:7

“Belated Entrance Into the Covenant Age”

TRANSCRIPT

We’re turning this morning for our Scripture reading to Acts chapter 18, in verse 18 and reading through chapter 19, in verse 7. You’ll recognize that we are rereading a section that we read last Sunday—a not really unimportant section, but not one of the more important sections of the book of Acts—and I’m rereading it simply because it fits in very well with the section that I will seek to expound this morning, from verse 24 through chapter 19, in verse 7.

But, let’s begin reading at chapter 18, inverse 18. And for those of you who may not have been here in the past few Sundays, or last Sunday particularly, the Apostle Paul is finishing up his second missionary journey. He has come down to Corinth, finally, in Greece. And now he is making his way back, in order to be in Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover. And he comes to Ephesus, is there for awhile, then goes down to Jerusalem and Antioch, and begins his third missionary journey. And so, we’ll read that because, evidently, Luke would like for his readers to understand some of the things that are transpiring in the Apostle’s life. And, also, as we will see in a moment, when he discusses Apollos’ ministry in Ephesus, he’d like for us to understand what happened in Ephesus while the Apostle Paul was gone. He had as we have read said that he would visit them again, and he’s gone down to Jerusalem and Antioch and he’s going to come back. But in the meantime, Apollos comes and has his ministry there, as well.

So, verse 18 in chapter 18 of the book of Acts:

“And Paul after this tarried there yet a good while, and then took his leave of the brethren, and sailed thence into Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila; having shorn his head in Cenchrea: for he had a vow. And he came to Ephesus, and left them there: but he himself entered into the synagogue, and reasoned with the Jews. When they desired him to tarry longer time with them, he consented not;

“But bade them farewell, saying, I must by all means keep this feast that cometh in Jerusalem: but I will return again unto you, if God will. And he sailed from Ephesus. And when he had landed at Caesarea, and gone up, and saluted the church, he went down to Antioch. And after he had spent some time there, he departed, and went over all the country of Galatia and Phrygia in order, strengthening all the disciples. (So, he’s started on his third missionary journey now, in Asia Minor. And Luke, now, tells us about Apollos’ ministry in Ephesus while Paul was on his visit to Jerusalem and Antioch.)

“And a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man. (That word can mean eloquent, in the sense of a man who was gifted in rhetoric, or it can mean simply that he was a very distinguished scholar. That is, a learned man and we’re not absolutely certain what is meant, but eloquent may be the meaning of it; or, learned. And Luke says): and mighty in the Scriptures, came to Ephesus.

“This man was instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in the spirit, he spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord, knowing only the baptism of John.”

Now, those of you who have studied the Scriptures a bit, and probably most of you in this audience fall into that category, you’ll remember that the Baptist—John the Baptist—was the ambassador of the Lord Jesus Christ, and came in fulfillment of Scripture, to announce His coming. And one of the chapters of the Old Testament that records John’s ministry prophetically, not naming him but speaking of his ministry, describes—is Isaiah chapter 40—and it describes his ministry in these terms. Isaiah chapter 40, in verse 1:

“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD’s hand double for all her sins. (Now, notice the 3rd verse, because this is used with reference to John the Baptist’s ministry in the gospel accounts): The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD. (Now, notice that expression “The way of the LORD...”) Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”

So, it was John the Baptist’s ministry to be the ambassador of the Lord Jesus, and to prepare the way of the Lord. Now, that is what is meant in Acts chapter 18, when Luke writes in verse 25, “This man was instructed in the way of the Lord...” That is, he was a man who knew the baptism of John the Baptist, and he knew the truth as John had proclaimed it, to the time that John’s ministry took place in the development of the plan and program of God. So, he was

“...instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in the spirit, he spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord, knowing only the baptism of John.

“And he began to speak boldly in the synagogue: whom when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly (more accurately). (And, incidentally, in the Greek text and probably this is recognized in the translations of those of you who have more modern versions than the one I am reading, Priscilla’s name precedes Aquila’s. May suggest—it may suggest that she took the lead in the instruction in their home of Apollos, this great preaching of the way of the Lord.)

“And when he was disposed to pass into Achaia, [and that, of course, is the northern part of Greece] the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him: who, when he was come, helped them much which had believed through grace: For he mightily convinced the Jews, and that publicly, shewing by the scriptures that Jesus was Messiah.

“And it came to pass, that, while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper coasts came to Ephesus: and finding certain disciples,

“He said unto them, Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed?”

Now, let me say with reference to this; that is a possible way to render this. It can be rendered that way. But, on the other hand, in the light of the teaching of the New Testament as a whole, it’s much more likely that what he said to them was not, “Have you received the Holy Ghost since you believed?” as if to believe occurs at one point in time and then the reception of the Holy Spirit later. Probably, that is not what he intended—what he said to them—and, is not what we should render this text as; but, rather, “Did you receive the Holy Ghost when you believed?” So, the reference is to the natural inevitable response of the Lord God when a person believes. The Holy Spirit comes to indwell them personally at the point of their faith in Christ. So, every believer is permanently indwelt by the Holy Spirit and, since that’s taught elsewhere in the New Testament, that’s probably the way we should render this.

“He said unto them, Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed? And they said unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost.”

Now, they don’t mean that they don’t have any idea that the Holy Ghost exists; they mean simply, We do not have any idea of the presence of the Holy Spirit now in active ministry among us. It’s obvious they had heard of this because they were disciples of John the Baptist and that was one of the great themes of his ministry. The fact that the Lord Jesus, when He came, would baptize with the Holy Ghost, and with fire. So:

“...We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost, (in the sense of ‘given,’ present in active ministry, is what they mean.) And he said unto them, Unto what then were ye baptized? And they said, Unto John’s baptism. Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of

repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus. When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them; and they spake with tongues, and prophesied. And all the men were about twelve.”

May the Lord bless this reading of His Word; let's bow together in a moment of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we are thankful to Thee and grateful to Thee for the privilege of the reading of the Word of God and we thank Thee for the light that it sheds upon our path. We thank Thee for these great indications of the ongoing of the plan of God. We look forward, Lord, to the completion of that plan and the glorification of the Triune God. We look forward to the coming again of our Lord to the kingdom of God, to the eternal state and to the ages of the ages of the future. And we do this, Lord, with anticipation because as we look back over the past history of men we note how Thou hast, unfailingly carried out the things that Thou hast said that Thou wouldst do in the inspired Word of God.

And, Lord, we thank Thee for the confidence and the assurance that this gives us, that the future is in Thy hands and everything, ultimately, will lead on to the glorification of our great God. And we're grateful, Lord, so grateful, that Thou hast included us in the saving ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. We thank Thee for the New Covenant, in His blood, and for the forgiveness of sins that is the experience of all who have rested their lives upon Him and His work at Calvary's cross. We thank Thee for the presence of the Holy Spirit, the inevitable evidence of the possession of new life in Christ.

And, O God, we pray for each one in this auditorium and for those who will listen over the radio, as well, we ask, O God, that Thou wilt work in all of our hearts to bring us to the assurance of trust in Christ that brings life. We pray for this assembly, for its leaders, its elders, its deacons, its staff, for those who work in the publications and the tape ministries and the Bible classes and the

daily vacation Bible school, and those who do work in the nursery and all of the other activities of this work of Thine which are important for the successful carrying on of the Word of the Lord. We give Thee thanks for all who have had a part; and we pray Thy blessing upon them.

We pray Thy blessing upon the whole church of Jesus Christ as well. And then, Lord, we pray for our country, for our president. We ask Thy blessing upon him and, particularly, in these critical days, with this crisis, with the hostages, we pray for wisdom and guidance to be given to all who have a hand in the negotiations that are taking place. Lord, we pray that we may learn to trust in Thee and follow directions that come from our triune God. And we appeal to Thee for those involved and for their safety. We give Thee thanks, Lord, for this meeting and for everyone present in this auditorium. We know that it is no accident that we are here and we pray that through the ministry of the Word we may be strengthened and built up through grace. We pray, in Jesus' Name. Amen.

[Message] Evangelicals debate constantly the merits of covenantal theology and dispensational theology, to use the terms that are most frequently used by evangelicals, each seeking to present the strong points of their system and the weak points of the system with which they are contending, within the evangelical family. And so, if one listens to a covenantal theologian, he will notice certain emphases and, also, some criticism of dispensational theology. And then, when dispensationalists are teaching, they will frequently set out what they feel are the weaknesses in covenantal theology and the strengths of their own theological system, which is only natural because that's the way in which we should think about the things of the Word of God. We should seek to have a structure in our thinking, because it's helpful to us in understanding the Word of God to have such a structure.

We have such a structure in almost every other discipline that we engage in, and in theology, which is the system of thought of all other systems of thought—the most important of all human thinking—it's of great benefit and a necessity to have a structure—a theological structure.

There are certain things that can be said for covenantal theology, and there are certain things that can be said for dispensational theology. To my mind, the truth probably lies a bit between the two of these systems; as you probably can tell, if you study at all the things that I say to you Sunday after Sunday.

The incident that we are looking at this morning is rather interesting because it does bare, indirectly, upon that friendly struggle. Because there is certainly evidence here of a great dispensational change in the program of God, produced by the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. And, incidentally, I don't suggest by this that this particular incident is an incident in which the adherence to these two approaches to evangelical theology would necessarily disagree.

What is set out here is that when John the Baptist came, there was a distinct movement forward in the plan and program of God; and that, when Jesus Christ died on the cross, and the Holy Spirit came on the Day of Pentecost, there was a further significant development in the plan and program of God. So, that's the reason why the subject this morning is, “Belated Entrance into the New Covenant Age.”

It's evident from what transpires in Acts chapter 19, specifically, when Paul came to Ephesus on his third missionary journey, and saw the disciples of John the Baptist; that they had not entered into all of the blessings that were believers, as a result of the coming of Christ and the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost.

We now, in this age in which we live, have greater gifts, greater enablements; and, we should have also a greater assurance of the possession of life than those who lived in the days of anticipation before our Lord came. So, we, in this age, have greater responsibilities, also; because we have been by God given greater light.

This affords us, also, another very practical insight, as we read these verses, because it shows us the essential evidence of Christianity is the possession of the Holy Spirit. Now, Paul makes that very plain in positive statements like Romans chapter 8, in verse 9, where he says, “He that hath not the Spirit of Christ is none of His.” So, the essential sign of the possession of Christ is the presence

of the Holy Spirit. “He that hath not the Spirit of Christ is none of His.” Does not belong to Him... So, the possession of the Holy Spirit is the evidence that we really belong to Christ. It’s not our privilege to say, “I belong to Christ, but I don’t have any evidence of the Holy Spirit’s presence.” The Holy Spirit’s presence is the evidence that we belong to Him.

One of the finest of the theologians of the 20th century, speaking generally, was a man whose works, from time to time, I quote. It’s James Denny, who was Professor of Divinity at the University of Glasgow, in Scotland. And Professor Denny, in one of his works, makes a very significant statement which illustrates what we are talking about. He comments on the fact that in the churches, of which he was a part, The Church of Scotland, it was customary to repeat the Apostles’ Creed on Sunday morning and that has, remember, a little sentence: “I believe in the Holy Ghost...”

Now, many of you in this audience have grown up in churches in which the Apostles’ Creed was quoted every Sunday morning. I have grown up in a church like that; and so, I remember that clause too. “I believe in the Holy Ghost...”

Well, Professor Denny said, “As familiar as it is to us through the accepted creeds of the church, such an expression as “I believe in the Holy Ghost” is entirely foreign to the New Testament. What the Apostles asked was not, “Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?” but, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?””

So, the point of the matter, as far as Professor Denny is concerned, is not simply the intellectual adherence to a doctrinal truth. Now, that is important. We are not trying to underemphasize it at all. But, the important thing is that we not only know that truth, but that we also have experienced that of which that truth speaks.

Now, the reason I say this is because not long ago, a very important evangelical man made reference to this statement of Professor Denny and he commented upon it this way, “The second fact that we should emphasize,” he’s talking about some other things, “The second fact that we should emphasize is that the New Testament presents the Holy Spirit in terms of experience, not of doctrine.”

Now, you can see that that is an overemphasis. What he wants to stress is the idea of experience. But, experience is not opposed to doctrine. Doctrine and experience go together. When the Apostle saw these individuals who were disciples of John the Baptist, he sensed there was something missing; not their doctrine of the Holy Spirit, but the reception of the Holy Spirit. And so, he asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” He didn’t say to them, “Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?” but, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?”

Now, it’s obvious that a person cannot answer that if he doesn’t already have a doctrine of belief in the Holy Spirit. So, we don’t want to fall into the error of overemphasizing doctrine at the expense of experience; or, overemphasizing experience at the expense of doctrine. We want to hold these two things in proper biblical balance. Now, we see, I think, in this an illustration of that.

I think it’s also very appropriate that John the Baptist should depart from the New Testament at this point. John was a very noble man. In fact, the Scriptures speak so highly of him that our Lord, Himself, says that “Of those born of women, none was greater than John the Baptist.” And yet, then He goes on to say, “that everyone in this age is greater than John.”

Now, obviously, He didn’t mean in the sense of experience, He meant greater in the sense of privileges. We do have greater privileges than John the Baptist, but I want to say, it humbles me to think of how poorly I have taken advantage of my privileges in the light of how marvelous John the Baptist took advantage of his more limited spiritual privileges. And I think it should make us all ashamed of how poorly we live up to the high standard of life set out in the New Testament. He was the last and greatest of the Old Testament prophets; a man so deeply committed to the things of the Lord that he was mistaken for the Messiah himself. He stirred the nation Israel deeply. He won, as a result of his ministry, some of the choicest spirits in Israel; Andrew, Philip, John and James the sons of Zebedee, and others. So, to minimize John the Baptist is to minimize the one of whom John preached.

And, remember, he said he was only “a voice of one crying in the wilderness,” and was actually a person who was seeking to make someone who was coming known. A noble man—well,

this is the last mention of John in the New Testament, so far as I remember—or, at least, his ministry fades from view here. But, it was surely a high point in his proper time.

Now, Paul is on his missionary journeys and he is finishing up his second missionary journey. He wants to get to Jerusalem in time for the feast of the Passover, in the spring. And he tells the people in Ephesus, as he travels back from Corinth to Jerusalem, that after he has ministered a little bit, he tells them that he will come back and see them again. But, while he is gone, a man by the name of Apollonius—now, that was probably Apollos’ real name; Apollos is a shortened form of Apollonius—Apollos came to Ephesus while Paul was gone. And Luke describes him in a very interesting way and one gains the impression that the picture of Apollos here is the picture of a person who might well have been the patron saint of Christian evidenced societies. He was the original effective apologete of the new age truth, so far as he understood it, coming after John the Baptist.

So, Luke says, in the 24th verse: “And a certain Jew named Apollos...” He was a Jewish man, and therefore we can understand that he was well instructed in the things of the Old Testament, objectively. He was born at Alexandria, a very important center of learning in his day. And, as a matter of fact, at Alexandria, a city that was constructed by Alexander, there was probably the greatest library of the ancient world—over a half million volumes in it, which at that time was a remarkable thing—it had been a great city in so many ways. It was the city of Euclid, it was the city of Philo, the Jewish philosopher and biblical thinker. It was the city of Quintillion, the famous Rhetorician.

So, Apollos came from a city in which there was much learning. Now, he came to the city of Ephesus, and he is described by Luke as an eloquent man, mighty in the Scriptures, instructed in the way of the Lord. And I know, if you had heard Apollos preach and if you had heard Paul preach, you would have commented on the different ways in which they preached. Apollos undoubtedly had unusual skills in the exposition of the truth and in communicating the things of the Word of God.

Paul, on the other hand, was direct; a man of insight and vision, and probably did not have all of the skills that Apollos did in presenting the truth; but, nevertheless, had an insight into the truth that, so far as we know, no other man had. I can see that the people in Ephesus—in the church there—some would have said, “I sure do like Apollos. I sure do like to hear him. He certainly to me seems to be a better expositor of the Scriptures than Paul.” And then, I can see some others saying, “I like Paul and I like Apollos. He has a beautiful way of sayings things, but Paul says more and seems to have a deeper insight into the truth.” And I can just imagine that there would be some disagreement among the immature believers. It’s not surprising when he went to Corinth, there were there those who said, “I am of Apollos, I am of Cephas, I am of Paul,” and then some had the nerve to say, “I am of Christ.”

So, here is an unusually gifted man, and we should really take advantage of the fact that God has given the Church gifted men of different kinds. So, there is an Apollos, and there is a Paul, and there is a Peter and others; and these are given in order that we may have some variety in the exposition of the Word of God. So, Apollos was something new for the Christians in Ephesus. We read: “He was mighty in the Scriptures, he was instructed in the way of the Lord,” and that, probably, meant that he was instructed in the ministry and significance of John the Baptist. And, being “fervent in spirit,” a man who lived up to the truth that he possessed, a man who, the Greek term suggests ‘boiling,’ was really a warm hearted, fervent preacher of the truth, as he understood it.

He spake and taught diligently, in order, accurately, the things of the Lord; but he knew only the baptism of John. So, he was a throwback, dispensationally. He was a man who in the new age is talking as if he were a man still in the old covenant age.

Now, of course, when John came there was a transformation of things, but men still lived under the Law until Christ died. And, while John the Baptist was the ambassador of the King, and there was a great stress on the fact that the kingdom of the heavens is at hand—that was John’s message—still, he lived in the old covenant age. So, here is a man, fervent in spirit, knowing the Scriptures, eloquent.

John, incidentally, used the Old Testament Scriptures himself; passages like Malachi, and also Isaiah. So, here is a man giving all of this information but he stands where John stood and, evidently, does not know of the completion of things in the ministry of the Lord Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. And he began to speak boldly. People must have been responsive. He went to the synagogue services and, remember, in the synagogues, men who were gifted by the Lord God had the privilege to stand up and teach. And that has come over in the Christian church—I lay stress on this because we have thousands and thousands and thousands of Christian churches that want to quench the Holy Spirit’s utterance in the local church, and so, I have to lay stress on this.

I remember Dr. Ironside many years ago saying, “Some of my friendly colleagues accuse me of preaching on the Lord’s coming too much and the only thing I can say to that,” he said, “is that they neglect it so much that I have to overemphasize it, in order to equal out the preaching of the Word of God concerning the prophetic future.”

Well, I have to emphasize this because it’s an important truth that in a meeting of the church we should have a time when men who have spiritual gifts are free to utter the things that God puts upon their hearts. This is biblical teaching practiced by the early church. And we should be thankful for it. That’s how Paul had a hearing in Antioch in Pisidia. And this is why Apollos had a hearing in the synagogue. They practiced that principle and the early church took it over. So, he began to rise up at the time of the exposition of the Word in the synagogue and he, evidently, made a deep impression upon people. And Aquila and Priscilla were coming, they had come over with Paul from Corinth to the city of Ephesus. And he had gone on and had left them there. And so, they listened to this man; and they were immensely interested in the things that Apollos was saying. They marveled at the eloquence of the man, his grasp of the Old Testament Scriptures, but they sensed he didn’t really have the fullness of the truth that they would have wanted him to have.

Very much as if you see an individual, a young man, perhaps, with an unusual gift, who has an ability to expound the Scriptures, but he’s never been very deeply taught in the theology of the

Word of God. And so, the tendency of the older Christians is to say, “He has all of the capacity for the presentation of the truth, Oh that he had a deeper knowledge of the Word of God to go with what God, evidently, has given him in the gift of communication.” So often, you see this in young men, who come to theological seminary, just to remedy that very fact.

So, they said, “Why don’t we take him aside and let him know about Paul, and let him know about the truth that he obviously does not seem to have grasped yet.”

So, now, they were from Pontus, at least Aquila was from Pontus; we read in the book of Acts, and so that’s in the north. They couldn’t feed him Southern fried chicken, so they fed him Northern fried chicken. And they had Apollos to their house, after the meeting, and they sat down and they began to discuss spiritual things. And so, as Luke says, Priscilla—evidently, she took the lead—we know she took the lead in the conversation—she evidently took the lead in the instruction, as well. And they expounded to Apollos the way of God more perfectly. They told him about the change of the ages and the things that had happened in the coming of the Holy Spirit. And Apollos, evidently, was very receptive to their teaching.

I don’t think that there are very few—I don’t think there are very many young preachers who have not, at one time or another, been very grateful for some people who have taken time out to instruct them in the things of the Word of God. I know, when I had first become a Christian, in Birmingham, Alabama, there were two or three ladies who were responsible for a great deal of my early growth in the knowledge of the Word of God. They put things in my hand, they put books in my hand, in order to give me an opportunity to grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ before I ever came to theological seminary. And, had it not been for them, I would have been totally lost in coming to theological seminary; but they put good books in my hands. And, as a result of that, I was enabled to grow.

Apollos was responsive to this; he didn’t take the proud and arrogant way and say, “they cannot teach me anything, I’m the preacher, they’re the listeners.” He listened.

Now, we read: “And when he was disposed to pass into Achaia,” he wanted to go over to Greece, the disciples wrote, exhorting the brethren there to receive him. And when he came over to Achaia, he helped them much which had believed through grace: “For he mightily convinced the Jews, and that publicly, showing by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.”

Now, then, at this point, the Apostle arrives in Ephesus; and this interesting encounter with the disciples of John the Baptist takes place. Paul comes to Ephesus, and there he finds twelve men. They are called disciples by Luke. We don’t know whether he means disciples of the Lord Jesus, or simply disciples of John the Baptist for John did have disciples. If you’ll turn back to passages in Matthew, like chapter 14, in verse 12, you will read of certain individuals who are called disciples of John the Baptist. So, he had his coterie of followers that could be called his disciples. That may be what Luke has in mind.

Paul found them, and he saw something about them that made him wonder about their spiritual status. He sensed that something was missing. And, mind you, they had been baptized in water. They are some people who say, if you have been baptized in water, there isn’t anything else that you can have. If you have been baptized in water, what else can you have? Well, these people had been baptized in water, but, nevertheless, Paul sensed something is missing. There was an evidence of a lack of communion with the Holy Spirit that Paul could sense in their lives. Was it that they had no love of the Word of God? Well, no. John the Baptist had great love for the Word of God. But there was just something missing. And so, the Apostle said, thinking and realizing, of course, as he teaches, that the presence of the Holy Spirit is the real test of the possession of Christian life.

He said, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And these men replied, “Why, we have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost.”

Now, Paul is not talking about a second blessing. There are people and have been people, and still are some, who feel that the Christian life is lived in this way: we hear the Gospel of the Lord Jesus, we believe in the Gospel that Christ died for our sins, and when we believe that Christ died for

our sins we have the forgiveness of our sins. But, the reception of the Holy Spirit is a second work of grace; and the reception of the Holy Spirit follows our conversion—sometimes, by a lengthy period of time, sometimes by a relatively short period of time—but the reception of the Holy Spirit is a second work of grace, usually brought about by further dedication to the Lord God.

Now, it’s possible that this text could be understood in that way because it is possible to render it, “Have you received the Holy Ghost since you believed?” But, since that idea is so foreign to the New Testament in the rest of the New Testament, it’s much more likely, in the light of positive teaching otherwise, that Paul said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Ghost when you believed?” A perfectly legitimate and, perhaps, the most normal rendering of these clauses that the Apostle uses. So, he is asking them, “When you believed, did you receive the Holy Spirit?” He has sensed that there is something wrong with them.

Their reply is a very interesting reply because it’s obvious, as I said, in reading the Scripture that they knew there was the third person of the Trinity. John talked constantly about Him. But when they said, “We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost,” they are talking about the coming of the Holy Spirit and His existence in working power in their midst in this age. They still like John thought of this as an age to come. So, “We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost.”

If you’ll turn to John chapter 7, you’ll see the same kind of expression used there and John further explains exactly what I am saying to you. John 7:37 through 39.

So, then, they say, “No, we don’t know anything about the presence of the Holy Spirit now,” and Paul recognized that this is what was missing from their Christian life. And so, he said to them, “Unto what were you baptized?” and they said, “We were baptized unto John’s baptism.”

Ah, Paul says. “Now I really understand.” And what he sees is that these men have been dwelling in the hinterlands of spiritual experience. Now, I don’t know where these men had gone. I’m just going to surmise what had happened to them. They had become disciples of John the Baptist. They had become attached to him. They had listened to John, they’d imbibed his message.

But then, something had happened, and these men had drifted off from the land of Palestine, where John was ministering. Maybe they wanted to proclaim the message of John the Baptist. But they went off into the hinterlands of the ancient world, wandered around from village to village, preaching the truth that John had preached. They, therefore, missed the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. They missed the events of the crucifixion, the burial, the resurrection. They missed the great event of the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. And, traveling all over the back parts of Asia Minor, they had finally arrived at Ephesus, that very important city. And here they had encountered the Apostle Paul, who had experienced the things that they had totally missed. He sensed there was some reality to them, but there was something missing. And it was the presence of the Holy Spirit.

So, he said when they said, “Unto John’s baptism,” “Ah, I see what the problem is. John baptized with the baptism of repentance; that is, John told people they should repent, in view of the coming of the king. And people did repent. They confessed their sins. They were baptized unto John’s baptism, in token of the fact that they were waiting for the king to come.

So, he said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance...” By the way, notice, it’s baptism of repentance, not baptism of salvation. The baptism was not their salvation; it was the evidence of their repentance. The baptism of repentance, “saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus.”

So, Paul said, “Look! John the Baptist was preaching a coming one, the Lord Jesus.” Just as we say today, in Old Testament times the believers looked forward to the coming of the Lord Jesus; in New Testament times we look back toward the redeemer who has come. We, of course, look to the future and His Second Coming as well. But, for our redemption, we look back at the cross.

Paul is confirming that when he says that John told them that they should “believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus.” And, when they heard this, “they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.” This is the only instance in the New Testament of rebaptism. People baptized unto John’s baptism; and now baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

And Paul laid his hands upon them, and the Holy Spirit came on them; and they spake with tongues, and they prophesied.

Obviously, what took place here was designed to convince the people in Ephesus that the Lord God was really with this new movement. Tongues and biblical speaking in tongues—biblical speaking in tongues, of course, is not ecstatic speech, or gibberish. Speaking in tongues was speaking in a known language which one had not studied. For example, if I were suddenly to complete my discourse in Russian, and there were some individuals in the audience—and there may well be—who understand Russian, they would be astonished. Not quite as astonished as I! But, they would be astonished. [laughter]

Now, if I were to do that, that would be biblical speaking in tongues; speaking in a known language, which you have never studied.

Now, the fact that I would be able to do this would be evidence, in this context, that God was with me, because it's a supernatural thing. And so, when Paul laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them. They began to speak with tongues and they also exercised the gift of prophecy.

Now, the gift of prophecy was the gift of communicating newly revealed truth. So, this is something that happened in order to convince all that the Lord was with this movement, of which the Apostle was the leader. Tongues were signs to Jews that God was with this new messianic movement; and here, they were exercised for the last time in the New Testament, as token of the fact that God is with this new movement.

We don't have time to talk about all of the implications of this; one of these days we will do that, but not now.

I must conclude by just drawing out a few points that are very obvious, I think, from this incident. First of all, nothing less than the actual reception of the Holy Spirit is genuine Christianity. If we are to have a real and vital understanding and experience of Christianity, we must know what it is to have communion with the Holy Spirit. It's not enough to have an intellectual conviction of the preeminence of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's not enough to have made a decision to adopt His great

ethical ideals. It's not enough to have decided to imitate His example. We must have Him who is life, holiness, dynamic love, through the Holy Spirit. And, if we have not the Spirit of Christ, as Paul says, we don't really belong to Him.

So, how important it is then for us to ask ourselves the question: Do I really have the assurance of the possession of the Holy Spirit? Now, of course, so far as our eternal salvation is concerned, we rest upon what Christ did on Calvary's cross. The saving work of His sacrificial gift of Himself on the cross is the ground of our salvation. The merits of His saving death are reckoned to those who in covenantal love belong to Him. The evidence of the reality of the forgiveness of our sins and of the possession of justification of life is the permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

“He that hath not the Spirit of Christ is none of His.”

And so, if you're in the audience, and you have believed in the Lord Jesus Christ truly, you are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The evidence that you have the forgiveness of sins is the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. If there is concern over that, and if you are not sure; you can always settle that question right now, by giving yourself to the Lord on the basis of the work that He's accomplished on Calvary's cross, receiving Him as your own personal Savior, in grace, as we read here, “Believing through grace.”

One last thing, notice that phrase, “Believing through grace,” now, one as he reads through the book of Acts will notice this progression. I've called your attention to it once before. When we read in Acts chapter 13, that those people in Antioch in Pisidia responded to the Gospel, Luke describes it this way. He says, “As many as were ordained to eternal life believed.” In other words, believing is the result of the ordination to life. We believe because we are elected. We're not elected because we believe.

So, “As many as were ordained to eternal life believed,” Acts 13, verse 48. Read it! Rejoice in it! And, if you are an Arminian, read it and rejoice in it, too, after maybe weeping a little bit over the fact that you didn't understand that until you've read it again.

“As many as were ordained to eternal life believed.” Then, when Paul was preaching to Lydia, we read, “Whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things spoken by Paul.”

And, now, we have Apollos, helping them who had believed through grace. Not through free will; but through grace. They had believed through grace. Faith is the gracious gift of God.

So, rejoice in the wonder of divine grace. Preached by Apollos. Preached by Paul. Given us in the New Testament as the message to proclaim. In grace He has given us the Gospel; that we believe. And in grace, He gives us to believe in the Gospel.

Some years ago, Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse was preaching in a message in a meeting, and he laid great stress on the fact that salvation was the gift of God and he said, afterwards a man came up to him and began to talk to him and objected a little bit to the things that he had been talking about. He said, “After all, it doesn’t make sense to say that salvation is totally of the Lord. We have to do something.”

Now, of course, Dr. Barnhouse could have replied, “Well, yes, we do have to believe; but belief is a gift of God. That’s what the Bible teaches.”

At any rate, the man went on and Dr. Barnhouse said, “Well, what do you think that we ought to do?” and he said, “Well, I don’t think that we’re saved by nothing that we do,” and it seemed as if a flash of insight came to him. And he said, “What we should do is have faith.”

And, then, he started of himself to cite the text, which had flashed into his mind evidently, as he was discussing with Dr. Barnhouse, “For by grace are you saved through faith.” And Dr. Barnhouse said, “His voice kind of trailed off, because there came over his face another appearance, another look; and he realized that he had already anticipated what was going to follow, and he saw that he overthrew his argument.”

So, Dr. Barnhouse said, “Well, go on, and repeat the text.” And he said, “And that not of ourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast.”

Faith is the gift of God; salvation is the gift of God. When men are saved, it's the gift of God. And the evidence of the reception of the gift of God is the gift of the Holy Spirit. We are truly blessed.

If you are here this morning and you have never believed in Christ, we invite you to rest your eternal destiny upon the merits of the Son of God, who as the Redeemer accomplished the saving sacrifice at Calvary's cross, and attests the reality of it by the permanent presence of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the saints.

Come to Christ! Believe in Him! Trust in Him and in Him alone!

Let's stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for these accounts of significant things that happened in the history of the early Church. We thank thee for Luke, the great historian of the church and for the doctrines that he, himself, has set forth, by inspiration of the Spirit in the Word of God. May we be responsive to them. And, O God, if there are some in this audience who may have had an intellectual comprehension of Christianity but have not yet come to Christ, O, give them no rest or peace until they rest in Him, and enjoy that communion with Thee that Thou dost desire that we all have.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.