

Baptismal Rite and Decimation of Christianity: An Expository Study of Acts 19:1-7

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Abstract

Twelve disciples found by Paul in Acts 19:1-7 were believed to go through a second baptism for their salvation to be valid. The passage as it were does not give a definite statement on the purpose of baptism whether for salvation or for identification. There are, however, four probing questions likely to agitate probing minds. These are: is baptism important or unimportant to Christian Kerygma? Why was it important for the disciples in this passage to do it right? If baptism is once and for all as claimed by Paul in Ephesians 4:5, why must Paul encourage these disciples to do it again? What should be the implication of this re-baptism to the unity of Christian Kerygma as taught and followed by Apostle Paul? This paper is an expository study of Acts 19:1-7. It adopts an exegetical and comparative analysis where necessary. It agrees with Pauline polemic that baptism irrespective of where it is done and as long as it is done right is right for Christian Kerygma. It recommends that any Christian subjected to the rite of baptism on account of a change of place of worship is nothing but a decimation of Christianity. Christian baptism must, therefore, be seen and approached in light of Christian unity all over the world.

Keywords: Re-immersion, Post-Pentecostal believers, Pre-Pentecostal baptism, Reductionism.

Introduction

Acts of the Apostles chapter 19 happens to be a sequel to chapter 18, particularly verses 22-23. There, Luke reports that Apostle Paul

was in Ephesus to strengthen the disciples. The record was the end of Paul's second missionary journey and the beginning of the third. A trip from Caesarea in Antioch and back to Ephesus – a journey of about 1,500 miles that took many months is paraphrased in three verses (Acts 18:22, 23; 19:1). The demarcation between Paul's second and third missionary journeys is not as distinct as the one between the first and the second, separated by the Jerusalem council. If we take Luke's report that Paul went up and greeted the church and then went down to Antioch (18:22), the third missionary journey may have started in 18:23. But Paul departed Antioch almost immediately and the journey that followed could hardly be called missionary because unlike in the previous two missionary journeys where Paul's speeches were directed at the Gentiles (Acts 17:22-31), everywhere he preached now, there were already believers on ground. Moreover, one can barely speak of a journey at all. Although there was geographical movement, (18:23; 19:1; 20:1-5, 13-16; 21:1-8), a majority of Luke's narratives is related with one single place and that is Ephesus.

To be a Christian in Ephesus required constant encouragement from tested and trusted leaders such as Paul. While Ephesus housed the site of a magnificent temple to Artemis and centre for occultic practices, many pilgrims were being drawn from all over the Mediterranean world annually to the city (Richards 309) for religious purposes. Ephesus was also the capital of the Roman province of Asia and centre of trade. The city was, therefore, famous, magnificent, wealthy and lost in sin (Eph. 2:1, 12; Roper 4). As lost as they were in sin, however, Ephesus was the most important city which Paul had so far visited in his missionary travels (Carter and Earle 280). On his brief visit less than a year before, the city had shown a real response to the gospel (18:19-20; Longenecker 483). To leave these fruits of the gospel without constant encouragement may portend danger, so Paul visited Ephesus to strengthen the disciples.

Post-Pentecostal Believers with Pre-Pentecostal Baptism (Oster 87)

Whenever Paul enters a city in his missionary journey, his usual point of call is the synagogue – a routine that makes him to look for any honest heart available. But the reverse happens to be the case in Ephesus. There was already a small church in place. According to

Acts 18:27, the brothers in Achaia wrote to the disciples there of the intending visit of Apollos. These believers were probably meeting in the house of Aquila and Priscilla (I Cor. 16:19). Paul, therefore, enters the heart of the city of Ephesus for the continuation of his mission. So, at the heart of the city of Ephesus, Paul found some disciples and Luke told us they were about twelve.

The word 'found' about and disciples should be of interest to biblical scholars. What is the significance of the word 'found'? Does it mean that Paul had been told about them? It should be remembered that Paul had visited some brothers before this contact. One thing is, however sure, these disciples found were not part of those Paul met before. Does it then mean that, in God's providence, Paul 'came across them'? The latter appears to be favoured because the Greek word used for 'found' is *heurein*, the infinitive form of *heuron* and it means to find either by a previous search (Matt. 7:7-8) or without a previous search (Matt. 27:32). Generally, it means to find without seeking (Zodhiates 682). The most significant thing, however, is that Paul had a contact with some disciples in the cause of his visit to see how the Christian were faring in the city of Ephesus.

Luke describes the men Paul met as disciples. Were they already Christians? Luke normally used the word 'disciples' to refer to those who were followers of Jesus (Acts 11:26). Was the word used in specific or general terms? Were they the disciples of Jesus or John? Many early Christians like John Chrysostom of the fourth century thought that the men were disciples of John and not of Jesus (Roper 4). But Luke may have used the term 'disciples' in its general sense of 'learners and followers' in which case they could have been disciples of any of them. However, with their answers to Paul's enquiries later, they were most likely to be the disciples of John. Howard Marshall, however, opines thus: the correct explanation of the passage is that Luke has told the story from the standpoint of the principal actor: Paul, met some men who appeared to him to be disciples (305-6). In calculating the numbers of the disciples, Luke says, "some" (vs 1) and "about twelve" (vs 7). How many were the exact numbers of the disciples? David Roper thinks there could have been eleven or thirteen (6). But we think not. Before Luke - a careful researcher (Lk. 1:1-4) - could say "about twelve men," he may have lost count at twelve. The men could, therefore, be twelve or thirteen but definitely not less than twelve.

Probing Questions and Shocking Answers

We have got to the time of question and answer and the connective conjunction 'and' makes this segment interesting. Luke is silent about what prompted a straight forward question from Paul to these disciples, "did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believe" (19:1 NIV) and their answer - "No we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit" (19:2 NIV). Their answer led to another astonishing question - "then what baptism did you receive?" and equally shocking answer, "John's baptism" (19:3 NIV). Commenting on the probable connection between being a confirmed disciple, Christian baptism and the reception of the Holy Spirit, Craig Bloomberg observed as follows: by the time we loom everything he (Luke) has to tell us about these individuals (the twelve disciples) however, it seems highly likely that he is simply using the term (disciples) phenomenologically, that is, according to their own self-recognition. After all, unlike Apollos, who had seemingly not heard only of the baptism of the Spirit, these "believers" have not even heard of a Holy Spirit (63).

Many issues can be objectively raised about the conditions these disciples found themselves. In the first instance, Luke does not tell us that Paul asked after their designation or identity. So, the issue of phenomenological description does not arise. Second, the disciples' answers are with all sense of responsibility and sincerity of purpose - they have never heard that the Holy Spirit has come into existence. This is nothing but ignorance. As observed by Thomas Lead: these disciples comprehended John's emphasis on repentance, but they failed to see the role of Christ as the object of their faith. After they understood that Jesus Christ was the coming one in whom they were to place their faith, they received Christian baptism (317).

Moreover, if the twelve disciples were those of John the Baptist, their ignorance could very well be accommodated because the arrival of the Holy Spirit did not meet John on earth. Even Jesus' disciples had to wait for His (Holy Spirit) arrival until after the ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven. Also, there is no evidence that they were available on the very day the Holy Spirit manifested himself at Pentecost. Buttressing this point, Trenchard opines that: as in the case of Apollos, the men had heard of Jesus, had been baptized with John's baptism of repentance, but had not been informed of the "consummation" stream of witness probably stemmed from

Galilee (1300). The disciples' response to Paul's first enquiry "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" does not indicate that they know nothing about the Holy Spirit. This was clearly presented in Old Testament and in the teaching of John the Baptist. Their undoing, if any, is that they had not heard of the giving of all the Holy Spirit through the Messiah as promised by John.

With all these in place, it is very hard to agree that it was the purpose of their non reception of the Holy Spirit that they were re-baptised. Agreed that something was wrong with their baptism because Christian baptism is in the name of the father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, nothing was ever wrong with their faith, hence, as much as their knowledge could carry them, they were Christians. Considering their time also, it was difficult to come across a nominal Christian. All were desperate to spread the gospel of Christ. Like Apollos who only went through the baptism of John (Acts 18:25) and whereas there is no biblical account that he ever went through rebaptism. Paul may have met these disciples at the battle front of evangelism before the enquiries began, perhaps their efforts were not convincing enough through the miraculous activities bestowed upon believer by the Holy Spirit as was the usual practice since the Pentecostal episode. Also, an unbaptized believer is scarcely contemplated in the New Testament (Bruce, pp. 363-364).

The gift of the Holy Spirit for miraculous occurrences was very rampant in those days. It was to convince the 'doubting Thomases' of the superior power of God through the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the reason why Paul did not follow the question with a sermon on the Holy Spirit, but with a sermon on Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit did not come to exalt Himself but to glorify Jesus (Jn. 16:14). And according to Apostle John, we do not show the presence of the Spirit in our lives by bodily gyrations or unintelligible speech, but rather by confessing "that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (I Jn. 4:2). With respect to the activities of the Holy Spirit in the Acts of Apostles, whenever and wherever special groups were to be added into the church, the Holy Spirit usually came upon them in an unusual manner. This signifies God's acceptance of each group (Lea, p. 317). This scenario occurs in Acts 2 (the first Jewish believers); Acts 8 (the Samaritans); Acts 10 (the Gentiles); then Acts 19 (the partially taught disciples in Ephesus). In his own contribution, Bloomberg observes that at first glance, this

passage appears to be the third and final deviation from the Pentecostal package" (recall under chapter 8 and 10) because both Christian baptism and the arrival of the spirit are separated from initial "belief" (p. 63). We must therefore be well informed that expecting the manner by which God bestowed the Holy Spirit upon the groups of people as recorded in Acts to be normal or usual today may be faulted (Lea, p. 318).

The response of the disciples to Paul shows the honesty of their hearts. The teaching of Paul had revealed that not only had their understanding been incomplete, but their obedience had also been inadequate albeit ignorantly. Without hesitation, "when they heard this, they were baptized in the name of Jesus" (Acts 19:5). The twelve men might have responded in a variety of ways. They could have become angry at the apostle for implying that their baptism was not good enough. Since John's disciples looked forward to the coming one, they were ignorant of Jesus death, burial and resurrection which is the heart of the gospel (I Cor. 15:1-14). They were just eager to be relevant in the spread of the gospel. They were sincerely wrong. Thus, they were sincere believers.

Re-Baptism or Re-Immersion?

Re-baptism is a coinage from a Greek compound word comprising of *ana* (Re) and *Baptizo* (I Baptize). It is the baptism of a person who has previously been baptized usually in association with a denomination that does not recognize the validity of the previous baptism (Culpepper and Johnson 203). This interdenominational rebaptism is a sign of significant differences in theology. It is nothing but exclusivism and reductionism. Without prejudice to churches that practice exclusive adult baptism such as the Baptists (rebaptising those who were baptized as infants because they do not consider infant baptism to be biblically valid), adult to adult Christian rebaptism can also not be considered as biblically valid.

A big controversy was provoked in the 4th century by the Donatists because of their penchant for rebaptizing adult Christians who had renounced their faith under the pressure of persecution (Cult Awareness, np). The mainstream church decided that the *lapsi* (backslider) could not be rebaptized because the sacrament of baptism was irrevocable, leaving an indelible mark on the soul of the baptized (*Catechism*, p. 1272). In particular, the Catholic church

holds that rebaptism is not possible. In their article of faith (p. 1272), it is opined that: incorporated into Christ by baptism, the person baptized is configured in Christ. Baptism seals the Christian with indelible spiritual mark (character) of his belonging to Christ, no sin can erase this mark even if sin prevents Baptism from bearing fruits of salvation. Given once and for all, Baptism cannot be repeated.

Also, the 1983 *Code of Canon Law* (1983 CIC) addresses cases in which the validity of a person's baptism is in doubt. Canon 869 reads: if there is a doubt whether a person has been baptized or whether baptism was conferred validly and the doubt remains after a serious investigation, baptism is to be conferred conditionally (*Code of Canon Law*, p. 869). It is significant that Acts 19:1-7 does not say the twelve disciples were "re-baptized" And nowhere else has the Bible said anything of "re-baptism." Subsequently, the idea of rebaptism is alien to Christian Kerygma. Baptism as an ordinance is an obligation placed upon every believing Christian. Usually it is done by immersion. Conditions may however warrant other modes such as affusion or aspersion (Pardington, p. 343). It is done in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit after which the candidate may receive miraculous gift as it were in the Acts of the Apostles and then be added to the church. Such a candidate does not need a repeat of that act throughout his or her sojourn on earth. On the other hand, though one may have gone through a form called baptism, if the ritual failed to conform to the New Testament pattern, he or she has not been baptized.

If an objective issue is to be made from Acts 19:1-7, it must be that sometimes, "baptism" is not baptism. There could be some occasions when individuals who have undergone a rite called baptism would need a repeat of immersion, such a re-immersion cannot be said to be a re-baptism since something cannot be built on nothing. With reference to the baptism of the twelve disciples, Paul refers to John's baptism as a "baptism of repentance" (v 2). It embodied and expressed repentance. On the other hand, it would be appropriate to refer to Christian baptism as a "baptism of faith" specifically faith in Jesus' death, burial and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-4). When people received John's baptism they confessed their sins (Mk. 1:5); before being baptized with Jesus baptism, they confess their faith in Jesus (Acts 8:37) having confessed, repented and accepted Jesus as Lord and savior.

What appears to be the most significant difference in both baptisms is suggested by Paul's statement that John told "the people to believe in him who was coming after him (Acts 19:4). The simple meaning is that it is not as if John's disciples did not have faith, their faith is only pointing forward to the coming messiah. But the faith at Christian baptism is pointing back to the one who died for the world retrospectively (Gal. 2:20). Having therefore gone through one immersion that was not strong enough to be equated to Christian baptism, we agree with Longenecker that, "doubtless in Paul's mind they (the twelve disciples) were not re-baptised but baptized into Christ once and for all (p. 484). If a traveler consulted an outdated map and got lost, the fault cannot lie with the map itself; it had been okay for its day. The problem is that the map had become obsolete and was no longer accurate. In the twelve disciples' religious journey, they had been consulting an outdated and outmoded spiritual map. With a big opportunity before them, a contemporary spiritual map is given to them through Paul and they grabbed it with open hands, hence their re-immersion.

Re-Baptism in the Contemporary Church

A woman told me she was baptized as a spinster in ECWA Church but got married to Christ Apostolic Church's husband and was asked to re-baptize. The woman's experience made me to remember that as a baptized Baptist Church member, I was asked (and I did) to re-baptize when I became a member (through the born again scenario) of the Abundant Life Church. Many other Christians may be going through this experience elsewhere without seeing any reason to voice out or perhaps without seeing any need to check the biblicality of such re-baptism. In the Pauline Epistles, little references are made to baptism. The few available allusions are metaphorical, most importantly to the theme of unity. In Romans 6:3ff, baptism is a union with Christ in death, which invariably translates to union with him in resurrection. The result is newness of life afterwards since "the old self is dead." In I Corinthians 1:1ff, Paul contrasted baptism with party groupings. He therefore calls for unity in the church of Corinth. Mores o, when members were neither baptize in his name, or Apollo, not even Peter. He stated categorically in verse 17 that the task that Christ gave to him was not to baptize but to preach the gospel, making baptism of secondary importance in Christian Kerygma.

In chapter twelve of the same I Corinthians, Paul observes that the Spirit gives different gifts but the difference does not mean disunity, since "by one spirit we were all baptized into one body." The same point of unity is stressed in Galatians 3:2ff and Ephesians 4:1f. As in Christ to whom we are all baptized to, all divisions are broken with neither Jew nor Greek; therefore, believers are called to one hope in the presence of one Lord, one faith, one baptism one God and father of all. In summary of Paul's polemic, in baptism, our identification with Christ is a corresponding qualification to be added to his church. In the church, we transfer the identity to one another in obedience to Christ and in bond of unity. Denominationalism becomes invalid, inconsequential and valueless thereafter.

The proliferation of churches in this contemporary time has added a disturbing angle to the practice of baptismal rite. It brings polarization, each with new set of ideas. The problem ranges from who to baptize and who is qualified enough to baptize? There is also the problem of what form, best mode and how? The end result is strife, bitterness, jealousy, hatred, arrogance and superiority complexes. It is as if Jesus Christ to whom we all subject our loyalties has different personality and identity. In the quest for more membership, machinery in the form of strategy is always set in motion in order to outwit one another. Any success usually results in the process of rebaptism to show a more qualitative spiritual encounter from the former. What this boiled down to is condemnation of others and overrated self-estimation as well as decimation of Christianity.

Conclusion

Baptism, in summary is both a sign and zeal. A sign representing in a symbolic sense, spiritual benefits as well as a zeal or personal token and attestations, confirmatory of solemn promises of spirit benefits. It is an outward and sensible sign, and an inward and spiritual grace. It must therefore be duly and devoutly performed with faith on the part of both the giver and receiver. Where this is done, the baptism becomes valid irrespective of which church the rite is performed, and if performed once and for all. A baptism without faith expressly pronounced on the part of the giver and the receiver in any church of whatever name and spiritual standard

cannot be referred to, in the first instance, as a Christian baptism. Such a candidate, as in infant baptism and even biblical Simon Magus in Acts 18 cannot show any newness of life that conforms to the Lord Jesus Christ. As there are saints in the Celestial Church, so also are sinners in the Deeper Life Church. As there are non-redeemed members in the Redeemed Christian Church of God, so also are regenerated candidates in the Anglican Church, Presbyterian, ECWA, Baptist and UMCA denominations.

There is, therefore, absolutely no need for a rebaptism except of course a candidate who is not at first instance sure of his salvation, requests for it. Such may be done according to the recipient's situation. But the challenge at determining a man's authentic baptism is that we are trying to discover what was in that man's heart at the moment and that is difficult, "who knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man, which is in him" (I Cor. 2:11). In the words of J.W. McCarvey, The most probable answer (as to why these men had to be reimmerzed), and the only one which harmonises with the facts is that they had been baptized by Apollos, or by someone teaching as he taught, since John's baptism had ceased to be a valid ordinance (p. 152). Today's proliferation of man-made rituals called baptism has greatly confused issue of whether or not individuals have been scripturally baptized. This might be the same situation Paul found in Ephesus. The coexistence of John's outdated baptism alongside Christian baptism muddled the issue in Paul's day. The twelve disciples believe that they had been baptized. It is even possible that some Christians thought the twelve had been baptized.

If Paul had not talked, both the twelve and the Christian public would have been in the dark. After all, the possibility exists that before Paul's arrival, the twelve disciples' baptism had been accepted by the Christians. In the contemporary church, many may not be sure of the reason for being baptized, others may have done it to please others or because everyone was baptized. Paul's approach to clearing up the confusion was to lay Great Commission baptism alongside John's baptism. To request for rebaptism because of a desire for a change of denomination is a disunity in the body of Christ and a decimation of Christianity.

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