

Derek French:

Sometimes the Lord calls the church leader to instruct those he ministers amongst who have not heard of some aspects of the Bible's teaching. It's always a joy to see such people come to a fuller understanding of the gospel of Christ and the ways of God.

In Acts chapter 19 we find Paul in the idolatrous city of Ephesus where he meets a small group of disciples like this. Paul, with his pastor's heart, seeks to helpfully correct this deficiency, and then goes on to share the gospel more widely in the synagogue and in the public arena.

Today we are confining ourselves to Acts chapter 19, verses 1-10. Gerard and Phillippa Chrispin are with us again, and Phillippa begins by reading those verses for us before Gerard explains them.

Phillippa Chrispin:

*'And it happened, while Apollos was at Corinth, that Paul, having passed through the upper regions, came to Ephesus. And finding some disciples he said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?"'*

*So they said to him, "We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit." And he said to them, "Into what then were you baptised?" So they said, "Into John's baptism." Then Paul said, "John indeed baptised with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus."*

*When they heard this, they were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied. Now the men were about twelve in all.*

*And he went into the synagogue and spoke boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom of God. But when some were hardened and did not believe, but spoke evil of the Way before the multitude, he departed from them and withdrew the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. And this continued for two years, so that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks.'*

Gerard Chrispin:

The spotlight again falls on Paul. While Apollos shares the good news about Jesus Christ in Corinth, Paul travels to Ephesus via the 'upper regions' of Galatia and Phrygia, north of the Roman province of Asia.

Ephesus is its capital city on the east of the Aegean Sea at the mouth of the River Cayster, Though somewhat in decline, through erosion silting up its harbour, it remains an important commercial, political and educational centre which passionately promotes Diana (or Artemis), goddess of fertility. Her temple will become one of the Seven Wonders of the World. The city's commercial success is built around the religious and commercial exploitation of the idolatry based on Diana.

Paul finds twelve unknown 'disciples'. Paul seeks out Christ's disciples to encourage and have fellowship with them. He also makes Christian disciples by gospel preaching and teaching God's word. Only God's saving grace, the power of God's word, the Holy Spirit's work within, and their personal faith in Jesus can produce true Christian disciples. But the twelve disciples Paul meets now are not Christians, as he discovers on enquiry.

In the book of Romans, Paul teaches through the Holy Spirit, 'if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.' So he now asks them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?' Unless a person is profoundly changed from within by God's Spirit, he is not a Christian. So Paul's question is a way to ask, 'Are you born again?' or 'Does Jesus Christ now live and reign in your heart?', or 'Have you become a new creation in Christ?' Their reply shows that they have not yet come to know the Lord Jesus. They have neither received nor heard of the Holy Spirit.

Paul learns that they have been baptised only 'into John's baptism'. Paul explains that John's baptism was to lead people to 'repentance'. John insisted that sorrow for sins must lead to forsaking them and to a new lifestyle. That is why Mark records, *'John came baptising in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptised by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.'*

There is no forgiveness without repentance, but Paul reminds them that John himself taught that they needed to *'believe on Him who would come after him, that is on Christ Jesus.'* Neither John's baptism, nor any other, can save a guilty sinner from judgement or hell. John's baptism was to remind the baptised

person that he needs to be saved from his sins, and for that he needs to repent and also trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Christian baptism cannot save. Salvation can only be by God's grace through faith in Jesus. Christians are told, however, to 'make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. Real Christians are commanded to be baptised. Obeying that command shows two things. First, being immersed in water depicts the sinner's own hopelessness, submerged in death, sin and judgment. Second, rising from the water is a picture of being raised to new life by faith in the risen Christ. Jesus died to take our punishment for sins, and rose again. His risen power empowers new Christians to walk in 'newness of life' through the Holy Spirit's help.

Baptism is also the Christian's personal statement of faith. He declares to a watching and often hostile world that he now seeks to live as dead to his own sins and to please his risen Lord. Baptism is the born-again Christian's personal statement-in-action that his faith is already in the Lord Jesus as his Sin-bearer, Saviour and Sovereign.

Paul reminds the twelve men that John the Baptist taught that they must believe on Jesus Christ, who would 'come after him'. They clearly do trust in him. Their immediate obedience to be baptised 'in the name of the Lord Jesus' demonstrates the reality of their saving faith in Christ.

The Holy Spirit has already come upon groups of new Christians at Pentecost in Jerusalem, then in Samaria, and later in Caesarea. Now he marks the birth of the Ephesian church. As at Jerusalem and Caesarea, the newly saved people speak in other languages as the Holy Spirit comes to them. As at Jerusalem, they proclaim God's word in prophecy. As in each place, all can see God at work in honouring his gospel and vindicating the truth of his servants' message. He comes to dwell in those who trust Jesus. In Ephesus only twelve people are baptised. But obedience is everything. God desires all Christians to love and obey him, whether small groups of weak individuals or large congregations.

God has sent Paul to go to the Gentiles, but he continues to witness to Jews as well. Despite hardships and beatings received before at the Jews' hands, his visits to the Ephesus synagogue continue 'for three months'. When he visits, he speaks 'boldly'. At Pentecost and throughout the Acts of the Apostles, boldness shows the Holy Spirit's personal control of the speakers. God still gives that boldness today to weak Christians who trust him.

But Paul's message is no emotional outburst produced by bold feelings. He is observed and heard 'reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom of God.' Faith transcends reason, but never negates it. No one can be saved by reason alone, though nothing is more reasonable than when a lost hell-bound sinner turns to the only One who can save him.

Compelling boldness and logical reasoning cannot guarantee that listeners will be converted. Hearts can be hardened despite overwhelming evidence about Jesus being powerfully shared. Paul meets that here: some synagogue hearers become 'hardened' so they do 'not believe'. They are in peril by not repenting from sin and yielding to God's amazing grace.

Hardened hearts can reach the point of no return. God will never refuse to save a truly repentant sinner, but hardness of heart can make him unwilling to turn and trust. Finally he may become unable to respond to God's offer of mercy.

The hard-hearted rebels go on to speak 'evil of the Way before the multitude'. Jesus said, 'He who is not with me is against me.' Inward rebellion against God can lead to openly expressing malice, opposition and ridicule. See it in the media when some well-known intellectual or celebrity rationalises opposition to God by rubbishing clear facts that equally intelligent and learned men see as clear evidence for the truth of the Bible and the gospel. Psalm 53:1 says, '*The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God."*' It takes a biased sinful heart, not an enquiring and honest mind, to produce an atheist and lead a guilty sinner to the blasphemous and disastrous conclusion that 'there is no God'.

By leaving the synagogue, Paul protests to those who express public opposition to the gospel. Jesus taught his apostles to deal with similar opposition by shaking the very dust from their feet. Paul now stops his synagogue ministry. He decamps to the school of Tyrannus. He 'reasons' for the gospel there from the scriptures faithfully, devotedly and 'daily' over a two-year period. What whole-hearted service!

Through Paul's ministry, Jews and Greeks throughout that province of Asia, 'hear the word of the Lord Jesus Christ.' The book of Acts shows that when that happens, men and women come to Christ, receive eternal life and become his disciples.

If you are a Christian who tries daily to help others to come to know your Saviour, be encouraged. Your work and witness is not in vain. Keep on keeping on. If you are not a Christian yet, God's arms of mercy are open.