

2. Apollos set sail for Achaia with the commendation and blessing of the brethren at Ephesus. When he arrived, Apollos immediately set himself upon the ministry of Christ's gospel – doubtless with the same fervency that had characterized his teaching at Ephesus. But now he ministered as a fit instrument, thoroughly prepared for the Lord's work by virtue of the Spirit's provision in insight, understanding, wisdom and power.

Again, because of his intention to transition quickly to the third missionary journey and Paul's lengthy stay at Ephesus, Luke provided little commentary on Apollos' ministry in Achaia and Corinth (ref. 19:1). Paul would later provide some indirect insight into it in his first Corinthian epistle, but all Luke added to it in the present account is a one sentence summary overview (18:27-28). That statement, however, does highlight a couple of the dynamics of Apollos' ministry.

- 1) The first is Apollos' apologetic and polemical labors among the Jews of Achaia. Scholars are divided in their opinions regarding who these Jews were. Some maintain they were the same Jewish community that Paul had engaged in Corinth (cf. 18:4-5, 19:1). While Paul had renounced them and subsequently limited his gospel ministry to the Corinthian Gentiles, Apollos was able to again engage them with the claims of the gospel. Others argue that Paul's experience with the Corinthian Jews – and especially the fact that he had openly condemned them – would have precluded any future discussion of Jesus. The synagogue community at Corinth would never have received Apollos, let alone engaged in ongoing debate with him. They had already been down that road with Paul.

Since Apollos' debates were public, he likely interacted with some of the same Jews as Paul had, but others as well. Whatever the case, Apollos was eminently suited to this sort of ministry and the Lord employed him in it in a mighty way.

- Apollos had a platform in this community because he was himself a Jewish scholar, "mighty in the Scriptures." He knew the Scriptures thoroughly, but he was equally schooled in Jewish traditions and traditional interpretation and understanding.
- Nor had he obtained his credentials in some mean place: Apollos obtained his learning in Alexandria, the very hub of Hellenistic Judaism and its culture and scholarship. If the ministry of the gospel involves "becoming all things to all men," Apollos was fully able to meet that obligation with respect to the Hellenized Jews of Achaia.

Apollos' background, scholarship and credentials gained him a platform with the Jews, but also uniquely qualified him to bring the gospel to them. He understood his Jewish audience and the way they read, interpreted and applied the Scriptures; for many years he had lived in their world. But now he had come to see the Hebrew Scriptures in the light of Jesus of Nazareth. Apollos was able to meet his hearers where they were, but, more importantly, he was able to lead them from there toward Jesus the Messiah.

Apollos had the intellectual, cultural, academic, and scriptural tools to engage the Jewish community of Achaia, but he also possessed great rhetorical and polemical skills. More than simply being able to “hold his own” with the Jews, Apollos was able to withstand and convincingly refute their arguments and conclusions. Natural, providential and spiritual endowments converged to enable him to dissect, analyze and dismantle their contentions.

Apollos was a potent and indomitable force among the Jews, and Luke noted that he took his polemical ministry beyond the synagogue into the public arena. Before long Apollos’ impressive scholarship and compelling rhetoric would have been common knowledge among the populace. Whether or not they understood the matters he was disputing or the Scriptures he was reasoning from, they would have marveled at this man whose scriptural acumen and powers of reasoning and argumentation left his counterparts dumbfounded and undone (18:27).

- 2) Luke’s pithy synopsis of Apollos’ ministry focuses on his labors among the Jews, but specifically as those labors served the well-being and benefit of the Church: Apollos’ public refutation of the Jews had the effect of “greatly assisting” the saints in that area (18:27b-28). Here, too, Luke is brief and vague, leaving the reader to “read between the lines.”

The first thing to note is that Luke didn’t specify the nature of this assistance and the Greek term is itself general and indeterminate. However, he did explain it to the extent that he associated it with Apollos’ interaction with the Jews. This seems to suggest that the Jews’ public humiliation resulted in them stepping back from openly and actively opposing the followers of Jesus (ref. 18:12-17). In this case, pride and selfish concern, not repentance and faith, acted to mollify Jewish hostility, but the Church was nonetheless “assisted” by gaining a degree of quietness conducive to its growth and well-being (cf. 9:31; also 1 Timothy 2:1-2).

Alternately, the prepositional phrase, “*through grace*” (18:27c) can be applied to the verb *helped* rather than the verb *believed*. With this reading, some argue that Apollos’ help to the Achaian believers consisted in his ministry of Christ’s grace in his gospel. This interpretation, however, depends upon taking the conjunction *for* (18:28a) in a continuative sense rather than its predominant explanatory/causal sense (by which it explains or gives the reason for what precedes).

No one can doubt that Apollos ministered the grace of Christ to the saints of Achaia, but it seems most plausible that Luke was here associating Apollos’ assistance to the Church with the fruit of his polemical interchanges with the Jews.

3. However soon after Paul’s departure Apollos arrived in Corinth, he continued there for throughout the initial phase of Paul’s third missionary journey and was still laboring in Achaia at the time Paul entered Ephesus (19:1). Again, Luke used his summary account of Apollos’ work in Achaia to transition his narrative to the third missionary journey, and his treatment of it has the Ephesian ministry as its focal point (19:1-41).

- a. The Ephesian account consists of three primary episodes (19:1-7, 11-20, 23-41) linked together by brief parenthetical passages (19:8-10, 21-22). The first of those episodes pertains to one of Paul's encounters with Christian disciples in Ephesus. In characteristic fashion, Luke gives no background or explanation for this encounter, immediately turning his attention to the matter of concern.

As noted before, Luke's juxtaposing of this passage with the preceding Apollos account – and especially his repeated reference to the baptism of John – indicates that he intended the two contexts to be read and interpreted together. These parallel passages contain common elements, but they also have notable differences. The most obvious of those differences is the central place of the Holy Spirit in the latter context.

- In the Apollos passage, Luke associated the inadequacy of John's baptism with a deficient understanding of the Scriptures, specifically in terms of how they should be read in the light of Jesus Christ.
- But in the present context Luke said nothing respecting the scriptural understanding of these Ephesian disciples. Rather, the issue in their relationship with John's baptism was their receipt of the Holy Spirit.

Interestingly, Luke revealed this deficiency by means of a recorded dialogue between them and Paul. He introduced these individuals as "disciples," and some commentators believe that they were disciples of John who knew little or nothing of Jesus of Nazareth. The strongest support for this view is Paul's comment to them that John directed people to believe in Jesus, which remark was followed immediately by their being "baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus" (19:4-5).

On the other hand, Paul's initial question implies that these disciples presented themselves to him as believers in Jesus (19:2). This is further supported by the fact that John announced Jesus as the Messiah and directed his Israelite followers toward Him (cf. John 1:19-37, 3:23-36 with Isaiah 40:1ff). These individuals could hardly have been disciples of John without having some knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth and holding the conviction that He is the Christ.

At the same time, it appears that something in Paul's discussion with them caused him to question whether they had been born of the Spirit. Perhaps it was the way they relayed their experience of coming to know Jesus; perhaps it was how they spoke of their present relationship with Him. Whatever the case, Paul was moved to ask them whether they had received the Holy Spirit when they believed.

In the end, whatever these disciples knew and believed about Jesus and their relation to Him, *it's obvious that they were not Christians in the true sense*. They had not been born of the Spirit (Romans 8:9-10; cf. John 3:1-6). This is precisely what Luke wanted his readers to understand, and this understanding is crucial to discerning the reason Luke included this episode in his account.

Luke's purpose in Acts was to record the actualization of the kingdom of God as promised by the Scriptures and the Lord Jesus Himself.

- His first account addressed the preparation for the kingdom in the birth, life, and work of Jesus and ends on the note of expectancy regarding the kingdom's imminent unveiling. Jesus' ascension signaled the inauguration of the kingdom, but specifically because He was going to send His Spirit from His Father (Luke 24:44-49; cf. John 16:7).
- Luke's second account (Acts) picks up where his gospel account left off – with Jesus' impending ascension to the Father and His promise to send the Spirit (1:1-8). From there, Luke moved immediately to Pentecost and the outpouring of the Spirit as marking the new age of the eschaton.

The coming of the Spirit is absolutely vital to the kingdom of God – not because it was a matter of scriptural fulfillment (Ezekiel 36-37; Joel 2:28-32), but because of the nature of the kingdom. Christ's kingdom – the kingdom of God revealed and promised from the very point of creation – is the kingdom of the *new creation*: It is the fulfillment of “sacred space” in the consummate, everlasting realization of the Creator-creature relationship purposed by God from all eternity. The kingdom revealed in the Scripture concerns God's intimate relation with His creation centered in man, the image-son. This is why the coming of the Spirit is crucial to the establishment of the kingdom of God: *The Spirit effects and mediates the union between the triune God and man (and thus between God and the created order)*. He did so first in the Incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth (the hypostatic union), and He subsequently does so by joining men to Jesus (and so to His Father) by His indwelling and transforming presence as the Spirit of Christ.

Thus the mark of the kingdom of God isn't the presence of the Spirit as such, but His *indwelling* presence – His work of bringing men into the kingdom by bringing them into a personal and ontological union with Jesus Christ. In building the kingdom, the Holy Spirit doesn't merely facilitate men's awareness and acknowledgement of Jesus as the messianic Savior. His concern isn't cognitive knowledge alone, but *relational* knowledge – the knowledge that is real and vital union in sharing in Christ's life and mind (cf. John 6:24-58; Philippians 3:1-11).

Luke understood this to be the nature of Christ's kingdom, and this is the reason that he made the presence and work of the Spirit the centerpiece of his Acts account. Acts opens with Jesus' promise of the Spirit and the fulfillment of that promise at Pentecost; the balance of the book records the work of the Spirit in building the kingdom in accordance with the divine purpose of global ingathering.

Jesus was clear that witness to Him depended upon the Spirit's coming, and when He came that witness would begin in Jerusalem and move outward to the ends of the earth (1:8). So it was to begin with the household of Israel (Jews and proselytes) and then expand to embrace the Gentile peoples and nations.

Luke recorded that process of fulfillment by means of a sequenced presentation of the Pentecost event. That is, he didn't record several independent "pentecosts," but several stages of the *one* Pentecost. A careful reading of Acts makes this clear, yet many of the charismatic persuasion use the claim of multiple Pentecost events to justify the notion that the supernatural Pentecost phenomenon – specifically, speaking in tongues – is normative for the Church in every place and time. This claim notwithstanding, Luke's account attaches the various Pentecost manifestations to the twin dynamics of kingdom growth promised by Jesus and the Scriptures: from Jerusalem outward and from the Jews to the Gentiles.

- He recorded the foundational outpouring of the Spirit and work of ingathering as occurring in Jerusalem among Jews and proselytes (2:5-11).
- He has the next outpouring and ingathering occurring in Samaria in the presence of Peter and John (8:14-17; cf. 1:8, 2:14-18). This episode not only enlarged the kingdom in accordance with Jesus' words, it testified to Jewish apostles that the kingdom was indeed reaching beyond the Jews.
- The next occurrence of the Spirit's outpouring was in Cornelius' house and involved God-fearing Gentiles (10:1-48). This was further fulfillment of the promise of enlargement, but it also provided still more compelling witness to the community of Jewish Christians that God was producing a covenant household founded and united in Christ (11:1ff).

In this present fourth and final occurrence, Luke has the Pentecost phenomenon occurring with presumably Gentile individuals at the far western end of Asia Minor, some 750 miles from Jerusalem. Jesus' promise was continuing to be realized as the Spirit's witness to His gospel and work in uniting men to Him was advancing inexorably toward the ends of the earth.

And so the episode at Ephesus serves to remind the reader of the nature of Christ's kingdom and how men enter it. As disciples of John, these men clearly knew of Jesus and their baptism (19:3) attested their embrace of John's teaching concerning Him. But cognitive awareness and acknowledgement don't constitute *faith*: These men needed to become sons of the kingdom; they needed to "believe in Jesus" (19:4) as a matter of Spirit-wrought faith through being baptized into Him (cf. 16:13-14; cf. also Romans 6:1-11; Galatians 3:26-27). John's baptism served this end as a baptism of *repentance*: Its purpose was to turn the sons of Israel from their self-righteousness – their confidence in their Abrahamic heritage and commitment to the Law – in order to be prepared to receive their Messiah (Matthew 3:1-12; cf. Luke 3:1-18). John had identified and announced Jesus as coming in the fullness and power of the Spirit and he affirmed to the people that He would baptize *them* with His Spirit (John 1:29-34). John heralded the King and His kingdom and declared that the sons of the kingdom would enter, not on the basis of their own righteousness, but their personal union with the Messiah through the baptism of His Spirit. For these disciples of John, that day had come.