

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

JOHN'S DISCIPLES: A SERIOUS PROBLEM

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Ian Fair and I, after biking or jogging together, relax in a hot tub and consider issues relating to Scripture and church. One question we have considered is the topic of this essay: How is the text of Acts 19:1–7 to be explained in light of Luke's overall scheme, especially with regard to the "unusual" way in which the Holy Spirit was bestowed by the laying on of hands (vs. 6)? This is one of three texts in Acts in which the bestowal of the Spirit on converts seems to depart from the usual pattern. It is also one of three cases (four if Acts 8:18 fits) in which speaking in tongues results.

The Gift of the Holy Spirit in Acts

Luke's literary style sets down controlling texts in the beginning of a book or a discussion. These controls are then foundational for reading the rest of his words. Luke 3:10–14 sets the agenda for the rest of the gospel with regard to repentance. The synagogue reading of Isaiah 61:1, 2 (Luke 4:18f.), along with Jesus' subsequent application of it to himself (vs. 21) sets the program for his ministry. Later in Luke 4:31–6:11, Luke presents the authority of Jesus in a number of ways (over infirmity, demons, nature, sins) as constitutive for his subsequent writing (cf. Luke 4:32, 35f.; 5:6, 10, 13, 31; 6:5). The beginning of Jesus' fateful journey to Jerusalem (9:51) is to be understood against the background of the passion saying in 9:31. The journey section (9:51–19:27) reminds the reader that Jesus was on his way to his death.

Such a programmatic, normative passage also occurs in Acts 2:38. The initial preaching about the resurrected Christ cut to the hearts of the hearers at Pentecost (2:37), and they cried for mercy. Peter's response echoed the words of John the Baptist in his call for repentance and baptism for forgiveness of sins, but Peter added two new elements to the former preaching. Now baptism was to be in the name of Jesus (cf. Rom. 6:1–4), and those who responded were to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Luke intends the reader to assume that all subsequent conversions in Acts took place on these terms. Certainly, varied language is used in Acts to describe conversions, but unless we assume the process was never standardized, then all the "elements" of 2:37f. should be present in each case. The most common descriptor in Acts is some reference to faith or belief (4:4, 32; 5:14; 9:42; 10:43; 11:17, 21 etc.). Next come references

to baptism (2:41; 8:38; 10:47f.; 16:15, 32; 18:8; 19:5; 22:16), then “obey” and “obedience to the faith” (5:32; 6:7), “turned to the Lord” (9:35; 14:15), repentance (20:21; 26:20), and “joined” (17:4, 34). Luke was not interested in saying everything in every case because he was not plagued with today’s divisions over these issues and because he had already given the “control” in 2:38, to which reference could constantly be made.

It was at the point of baptism (preceded by faith and a penitent heart) that God bestowed the Holy Spirit. This view is supported by all the relevant texts in Luke-Acts. The only apparent aberration is in Acts 10:44–48, but these verses, on closer examination, are supportive as well. Luke prepares for the view of Acts on the Spirit by describing the reception of the Spirit by Jesus at his baptism (Luke 3:22).

In the third person account of Paul’s conversion, Ananias told Paul that Jesus had sent him so Paul could be filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:17). The complement to this text in Acts 22:16 says Ananias bade Paul to arise and be baptized, calling on Jesus’ name, so that his sins would be washed away. Noteworthy is that these texts in Acts repeat the two “new” elements found in Acts 2:38, the name of Jesus and receipt of the Holy Spirit.

As indicated, the only seeming exception to this pattern is found in Acts 10:44–48. One can imagine Peter’s difficulty, despite divine urging (Acts 10:9–16, 19, 34f.), in offering salvation to Gentiles who had not first converted to Judaism. To do so would seem to invalidate all the rich history and ritual of God’s chosen people. Peter seems to have stopped just short of calling on Cornelius and his people for response when God sent the Holy Spirit on “all who heard the word” (vs. 44). When this happened, Peter was amazed as the Gentiles spoke in tongues. Peter’s response, “can anyone forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have” (vs. 47), makes sense when we recognize that in every other instance the coming of the Spirit was at baptism. The leaping of the immense gap between Jew and Gentile called for a decisive, divine impulse. The use of tongues was such an undeniable demonstration that the Spirit had come and thus that the entire proceeding was the work of God. Nowhere else do we find the gift of the Spirit preceding baptism because this was a once in history event of the greatest moment.

This bestowal of the Spirit was similar to the baptism of the Spirit promised by John (Acts 11:16f.). This case and the Pentecostal experience are the only instances where the granting of the Spirit is called a baptism (Acts 1:4; 2:1–4). The baptism of the Spirit, rather than being one of a number of “measures” of the Spirit, thus describes the overwhelming nature of the experience. Not only was the phenomenon itself remarkable, but the occasion marked the beginning of the “last days” (Acts 2:17, quoting Joel 2:28) and of the church.

In Acts 19:2, when Paul learned that the twelve had not received the Spirit, his next question concerned their baptism since the reception of the Spirit was

connected with baptism in Jesus' name, not the baptism of John. Other references in Acts clearly indicate that the Holy Spirit was the endowment of the church, but are not as clear in connecting it with baptism. However, Acts 5:32 does say that the Spirit was given to those who obeyed God, and Peter and John prayed that Samaritans who had been baptized would receive the Spirit (Acts 8:15f.). A number of references in Acts show the Spirit purifying the church (5:3, 9), enabling difficulties to be met victoriously (4:31; 6:3, 5), or, especially, empowering the proclamation of the gospel (e.g., 4:8; 6:10; 8:29; 10:19; 13:4). Acts never indicates that the Spirit descended upon the unconverted to make conversion possible. Rather, it was an in-house blessing, active to further God's purposes through his people.

To restate what was said earlier, four texts in Acts are bound together by common, and atypical, elements. In Acts 2:4; 10:46; and 19:6 those affected were able to speak in tongues. In Acts 2 speaking in tongues is clearly identified as foreign languages (vss. 7–11, especially 11) since the apostles were "telling . . . the mighty works of God" (vs. 11). Peter's explanatory citation of Joel 2:28f. did not mention tongues, but the equation with prophecy appears in Acts 2, 17, and 18. A supernatural event had transpired that had the ultimate goal of leading to salvation through Jesus' name (vs. 21).

The coming of the Spirit thus inaugurated the new age. The sound like wind and the sight like fire (2:2f.) may have been witnessed only by the "all" of verse 1 (probably the apostles, although some would argue for the one hundred twenty of Acts 1:15), but the tongues were obvious to all the "multitude." Yet once the tongues had attracted attention and verified the coming of the Spirit, they were not mentioned again in Acts 2, especially not in 2:42–47, where one might have expected a reference if they were a continuing part of church life. We hold that the gift ceased when it had verified the coming of the Spirit. If someone claimed that the Spirit had come, that claim might be disputed by witnesses. But such a dispute would be negated when the tongues verified the bestowal.

In Acts 10:46 the Spirit fell upon the Gentiles and they spoke in tongues, to the amazement of Peter and the Jewish believers present. The content of their inspired speech is described as "extolling God." As in Acts 2, there is no indication of any continuing role of the tongues in the lives of the church or the converts. In this remarkable episode the tongues were an audible demonstration of the coming of the Spirit. How else would the Jewish Christians present know Gentiles had received the Spirit? The tongues were undeniable proof.

In Acts 19:1–7 the "about twelve" who were rebaptized in Jesus' name and received the Holy Spirit "spoke in tongues and prophesied." Once again the tongues verified the coming of the Spirit and validated the second immersion of these "disciples."

We should probably add to these texts Acts 8:18. When the Samaritans had received the Spirit, Simon "saw the Spirit was given through the laying on of

the apostles' hands." Unless there was some empirical evidence, Simon would only have noted two men touching certain Samaritans, but something besides that happened. Since in the three other cases cited it was the gift of tongues, it is likely that this was the case here as well.

Thus we have three, or probably four, cases in which a special gift of tongues verified an action of God. Further, in the last three cases (Acts 8, 10, and 19) there was a departure from the normative coming of the Spirit at baptism indicated in 2:38. In Acts 8 and 19 the gift came by the laying on of hands, subsequent to baptism (though Acts 19:6 could be interpreted as the act of baptizing) and Acts 10 presents the solitary instance of the advent of the Spirit preceding baptism. Each of these four cases was a watershed moment in the early church, thus necessitating God's special action.

The case for the significance of Acts 2 is obvious. Luke's gospel closes with a promise of power (24:49). Acts describes the great significance of the incarnation. The promise of Luke 24 is amplified and explained in Acts 1:4–8 as the coming of the Spirit, which would empower the worldwide witness to the resurrected Christ. Acts 2 explodes the new age into history with the fire and wind of the Holy Spirit.

The second case occurs in Acts 8, where the gospel moved out of the purely Jewish context into the Samaritan world. The gospel of Luke prepared us for this with three unique stories involving Samaritans (9:51–56; 10:25ff.; 17:11–17). Much uncertainty exists about the Samaritans since most sources of information are late and not all the available traditions can be considered reliable.

Later Samaritan traditions regard Moses as the *tahib*, the restorer or coming one, but it is difficult to know if this was a part of Samaritan theology at the time of the episode in Acts 8. Even with the uncertainties regarding the Samaritans and with the recognition that their faith, like that of the Jews, may have been splintered enough that one cannot speak of a "normative" Samaritanism, there is no question about the strain, if not the break, between them and the Jews.

The record of the Samaritan mission in Acts 8:4–25 is remarkable indeed. A Jewish preacher, Philip, entered hostile territory, proclaiming a Jewish Messiah. His message would have challenged Samaritan thought. Yet the Samaritans were receptive, and both men and women were baptized. No doubt the signs done by Philip, including notable exorcisms and healings of paralytics, were a powerful incentive to attend carefully to his message. Startling exhibitions of divine power overcame theological scruples. The Samaritans were not asked to convert to Judaism, but to a "new" faith, albeit at the time an exclusively Jewish one.

If preaching to the Samaritans did not leap the great gulf breached in the case of Cornelius (Acts 10), at least it did have to jump a lesser divide. These conversions augured further evangelism beyond strictly Jewish limits. Would

the church in Jerusalem accept this bold outreach? They did, indeed, sending Peter and John, who confirmed the previous work of Philip. Contrary to the usual manner of the bestowal of the Spirit, in this case it was through the prayers and laying on of hands by Peter and John that the Spirit came on the converts. The coming of the Spirit in this atypical way both showed divine approval and sent an unmistakable message to any doubters in the Jewish church. Had this been a conversion of Jews, as in 2:41, 47; 3:4 and 6:7, such a special circumstance would not have occurred, but the situation called for divine activity, apparently in empirically observable forms. We now have seen two significant circumstances in which God made his will clear and demonstrated it in special ways.

The third case is the opening of the Gentile ministry. Its radical nature is clear by the extensiveness with which Acts treats it, telling the story in chapter 10, with inner story repetitions (10:22, 28, 30–33), and by the difficulty experienced by the church in accepting it (11:1–18; 15:1–32). Jewish Christians understandingly question whether God would change the laws that had stood for centuries. What of circumcision, food laws, Sabbaths, and temple festivals? What consequences would come if a community were formed in which Jews and Gentiles were equal in Christ?

Nonetheless, Acts 10 opens up the call of the gospel to the entire human race through the conversion of Cornelius. Even though Peter seemed to have been inching toward a broader understanding (cf. 9:43), he was reluctant to take this evangelistic step. He argued with God when told to eat unclean food (vs. 14). The Holy Spirit had to prod him into meeting Cornelius's Gentile emissaries (vss. 19, 20). On arriving in Caesarea, he acknowledged that he had learned that God would save those from any nation without obligating them to convert to Israel's faith. But as he preached Christ (vss. 38–43) and announced the offer of forgiveness of sins to "everyone who believes in him," we might see him as reluctant to make a call for decision.

It was an epic moment. At that time God stepped in and did what Scripture records as a once-in-history event. He sent the Spirit on the Gentile hearers, making it clear he accepted them on the terms Peter had announced. The "believers from among the circumcised" called for the baptism of those who had received the Spirit because they knew the connection between baptism and the Spirit. This instance is bound to Acts 2 and 8 by the gift of tongues and by the departure from the norm in the bestowal of the Spirit. Again it would appear that these two phenomena, in the theology of Acts, mark watershed events in the story of the early church.

The Gift of the Spirit in Acts 19

One more instance of the gift of tongues and an unusual bestowal to the Spirit appears in Acts 19:1–7. This text, with its rebaptism of "about" twelve men who had previously been immersed with John's baptism, has the two

elements we have noted in Acts 2, 8, and 10. Verse 6 seems to indicate that Paul laid his hands on the twelve subsequent to their baptism and “the Holy Spirit came on them.” The same verse says they consequently spoke in tongues and prophesied.

Other parallels exist between this passage and Acts 2:38. In that text two new elements went beyond what John’s baptism had done. That “new” baptism was in the name of Jesus and resulted in reception of the gift of the Holy Spirit. The same two elements appear in Acts 19. In verse 5 they were baptized “in the name of the Lord Jesus,” and in verse 6 they received the Spirit.

Since each of the other cases in Acts displays an extraordinary granting of the Spirit and the gift of tongues, Luke apparently uses these markers to indicate circumstances of special moment. That is relatively clear in chapters 2, 8, and 10. If the same theology prevails here, this was also a significant event. But what was its significance? Clearly the story does demonstrate the necessity of the indwelling Spirit for the life to which God calls people. A survey of the more than fifty references to the Spirit in Acts reveals how central the power of the Spirit was in the life of the church. Expanding the survey to include Paul (cf. Rom. 8; Gal. 5:22–23) makes the point clearer. But the circumstances of this text seem to imply more than their spiritual need. Acts 2, 8, and 10 deal with people who, rather than being complete foreigners to the gospel message, were already partly “in the way.” Jews (Acts 2) were monotheists who hoped for the coming of a messiah. Samaritans (Acts 8) were also monotheists and in most respects shared the same faith as Israel’s. Cornelius (Acts 10) seems to have been a God-fearer. Acts 10:2 makes his piety explicit. The twelve in Acts 19 knew the prospective preaching of Jesus done by John and had been baptized as penitents, who were thus forgiven. Thus in Acts 2, 8, 10, and 19, believers who were “on the way” were fully drawn into the new people of God, his true Israel.

All this means that in the church or churches to which Luke wrote, the inclusion of those whom the twelve represented was as fully in need of divine demonstration as the conversions of the Samaritans and the Gentiles. This fact raises this situation to a position of greater importance than is often assumed. If this was not an urgent concern to Luke, then why was the situation mentioned, and why is it set apart by the two markers found only in Acts 2, 8, and 10? It was necessary for God to demonstrate that those like the twelve must be rebaptized, and that in so doing Paul was acting properly.

Thus some sort of John the Baptist groups or individuals existed within the area of Luke’s readership, and Luke needed to make it clear how they should respond to the Christian message. Whether such people were part of Luke’s churches or they operated independently, it was important that the church be unified, composed only of those baptized in Jesus’ name and in receipt of the Holy Spirit.

John the Baptist in Luke-Acts

To understand Acts 19, one must look more broadly at the portrayal in Luke-Acts of John the Baptist. He appears in Luke as a man sent from God, and to reject him and his message was to reject God (Luke 1:13–17; 7:20f., 26; 16:16; 20:6–8). This heightens the importance of John's role as one preparing the way for Jesus. He was not trying to draw men to himself, but to lead them to another, hence the story in Acts 19:1–6.

Luke, in recording the circumstances surrounding the birth and infancy of John in chapter 1, gives a wealth of information found only in his gospel. Yet the texts are carefully juxtaposed with texts about Jesus, showing the superiority of the latter and depicting John as the harbinger.

Gabriel announced that both John (1:13–20) and Jesus (1:31–37) would be conceived supernaturally, but John would be a “prophet of the Most High” (1:76) whereas Jesus would be the “Son of the Most High” (1:32). Zechariah doubted God's promise (1:20) while Mary believed (1:38, 45). The parallel literary forms in which these two episodes are related underscore the superiority of Jesus.

The two narratives come together in 1:39–45, where John, a fetus in his mother's womb, leaped for joy at the presence of the “mother of my Lord” (1:43). The birth of John in 1:57–66 parallels the more extensive and spectacular birth of Jesus in 2:1–20. In Zechariah's speech at John's birth, he emphasized the role of his son in preparing the way for the Lord (1:76). At the end of chapter 1, Luke moves John aside and gives exclusive attention to Jesus throughout chapter 2.

Further indications of John as the one preparing the way are found in the OT quotation in 3:4, in the call for repentance (an early instance of the kingdom ethic in 3:10–14), and in John's self-humiliation in deference to the coming one (1:15–17). In Luke 7:18–23 John sent his disciples to Jesus. In Luke 11:1 John's teaching about prayer was a sort of preparation, for it led Jesus' disciples to inquire for further prayer instruction.

Also, apparently John's disciples (or some of them) continued a special lifestyle. Were they congregational or formed in cell groups? Information is lacking, but given the continuance of their particular devotions, some kind of group activity cannot be ruled out.

John's disciples fasted often and prayed (Luke 5:33), but so did many Jews. This specific reference indicates something special, distinct from usual Jewish piety, and may well imply some kind of separated or partly separated cadre of disciples. Luke 11:1 also refers to their prayers, but the context implies special prayer instruction from John. The content of such prayers is not given, but we might suppose it had to do with repentance and the coming kingdom.

The continued existence of a Johannine group even after their leader was martyred is implied by the popular opinion about Jesus in the views of the people reflected by Herod (Luke 9:7–9) and the twelve (9:19). Regard for John did not diminish, Luke 20:6 indicates. The Jewish leaders, put on the defensive

by Jesus, refused to deny that John's baptism was from heaven because to say it was from men would lead "all the people to . . . stone" them. This is an exceedingly strong regard for a teacher who had been dead for some time.

Thus there is no doubt of the importance of John in Luke's gospel. Perhaps most significant in this survey is Luke's "minimizing" of John in a way that did not diminish his role in the divine plan, but did move him aside so that his disciples would ultimately follow Jesus. Luke does not wish to encourage an inappropriate regard for John, such as characterized those about whom he was concerned in Acts 19:1-7.

In addition to the aforementioned texts, others in Luke-Acts treat John the Baptist and his disciples:

(1) In Luke 3:21 Jesus was baptized, but Luke does not indicate that John performed the act. In fact, in the previous verse John had been imprisoned by Herod. A naive reader would conclude that John did not baptize Jesus. Luke certainly knew from his source that the baptism was performed by the Baptist (cf. Mark 1:9). But he chose not to tell his readers that, thus minimizing the role of John.

(2) Luke 5:33 refers to John's disciples fasting often and offering prayers. Mark 2:18 describes the same action, while in Luke there is only a report of it. Thus it seems Luke gives a bit less prominence to John than does Mark.

(3) Luke omits Matt 11:12-15 (presuming he knew the tradition, which is likely, given the relation of John to Elijah in Luke 1:15). This Matthean text specifically identifies John with Elijah.

(4) Luke 7:18ff. tells of John sending two of his disciples to ask Jesus if he was the coming one. Matthew 11:2 notes that John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ. Except in 3:20, Luke omits any reference to his imprisonment prior to John's martyrdom. Then, in Luke 7:21 only Luke indicates that Jesus responded to John's messengers by curing and exorcising "at that hour." This serves to strengthen the position of Jesus vis-à-vis John when compared to Matthew's account. It was as if to say that Jesus, not John, did such wonders. Luke, like Matthew, directs the attention of John's disciples to Jesus.

(5) One of the most remarkable cases is Luke's omission of the lengthy account of John's death detailed in Mark 6:17-29 and Matthew 14:3-12. This significant event receives only passing mention in Luke 9:7-9, with Herod's remark that he had beheaded John. Otherwise, Luke's readers would not know that John had been executed. Since Luke apparently did not wish to contribute to any high regard for a martyr, he bypassed the martyrdom with only a sideways glance. Luke 9:9 seems to have Herod saying that due to John's decapitation, Jesus could not be the risen John. Mark 6:16 seems to leave the possibility open in the forum of public opinion.

(6) Luke shows a special interest in Herod Antipas (cf. 3:1; 8:3; 13:31f.; and especially 23:6-13, 15, all of which are unique to Luke). Why, then, did he

omit one of the most notable acts of Herod found in Matthew and Mark—the execution of John?

(7) In Luke 11:1 Jesus' disciples asked to be taught a prayer "as John taught his disciples." The subsequent instruction in the Lord's Prayer tells the reader that the prayer content taught by John had now been supplanted.

(8) Luke chooses to omit certain personal details found in Mark regarding John, including the reference to those whom he baptized confessing their sins (1:5) and the reference to John's dress and diet (1:6).

Some of these instances are more probative than others, and there are details about John given only in Luke (besides chapter 1, already noted, cf. 3:10–14). In sum, however, Luke omits the evidence that would encourage individuals to remain with, or become a part of, a "John the Baptist" group.

A final concern is whether such "Baptist" communities can be documented for Luke's place and period. This is virtually impossible to demonstrate since we do not know exactly when or where Luke wrote. Some have argued that some of the John the Baptist material in the Synoptics is theological in the sense that earlier traditions have been "remodeled" to suit the purpose of each author. It would follow from this that the Lukan material in chapters 1 and 3, since it is more extensive than that in the other Synoptics, could argue for a continued interest in John at this later period. Luke's indications of the piety of John's disciples (fasting, praying) and the case of Apollos (Acts 18:24ff.), if taken at face value, demonstrate the continued vitality of the Johannine relationship.

Conclusion

The people represented by the twelve posed a serious problem for Luke's readers. One can imagine questions arising about what was required of them for complete inclusion in the church. What was their relation to the church? Were they an outside group? If so, were they friendly, or were they rivals? The fact they are designated "disciples" seems to argue against their being an outside group. If they were an inside group, were they insisting that they were in full fellowship with the rest of the community? Were there intrachurch disputes regarding the validity of their response to God's call through John's baptism? Did they consider themselves full members or "half members"? How did others in the church consider them? These and other issues apparently swirled around those who had received John's baptism.

What was the church to do? This issue could become seriously divisive. Luke's answer was "they must be rebaptized." Only then would they be in relation to Christ, their Savior. Only then would they be invested with the gift of God's Spirit. Luke may not have been the first to enunciate this requirement, but he is the first and only witness we have indicating this answer to a perplexing ecclesiological problem.