

## **Is Rebaptism Biblical?**

Acts 19:1-7; Ephesians 4:5

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A minister once told a member of his church who had asked if she could be baptized again in recommitting her life to Christ, “I will baptize you as many times as necessary for it to take.” That may seem extreme to our ears, but it raises an important question about baptism: How many times should baptism be administered to any single member of Christ’s Church?

Since circumcision was the outward sign of the Covenant of Grace in the Old Testament (just as baptism is the outward sign of the Covenant of Grace in the New Testament), how many times could one be circumcised in the Old Testament? Only once! The Lord deliberately chose an outward sign that was not repeatable, for outward circumcision pointed to the promise of a single inward circumcision in cutting a believer off from all the guilt of his sin once and for all in his justification before God (Romans 4:11). Just as one is not justified before God repeatedly or more than once (though sanctification continues throughout a Christian’s life), so an unrepeatable outward sign (circumcision) pointed to an unrepeatable justification. So likewise, water baptism being the New Covenant equivalent of circumcision is intended by the Lord to be an unrepeatable outward sign and seal of God’s promise of an unrepeatable justification in being cleansed from all the guilt of sin once and for all (Revelation 1:5).

Was the baptism of John the Baptist Christian baptism or were those baptized by John rebaptized by the apostles with Christian baptism? Our main points are: (1) The One, Unrepeatable Act of Water Baptism (Acts 19:1-5); (2) The One, Unrepeatable Act of Spirit Baptism (Acts 19:6-7).

### **I. The One, Unrepeatable Act of Water Baptism (Acts 19:1-5).**

A. In the previous sermon, we were introduced to the mighty minister of Jesus Christ, Apollos. Apollos began preaching in Ephesus after Paul departed from Ephesus. Apollos preached a message of faith in the Lord Jesus, but he was deficient in his understanding of what the Lord Jesus had already accomplished in redemptive history (which Aquila and Priscilla gladly supplied as they invited Apollos to their home). We are not told what Apollos specifically lacked, but we are told that he knew only of the baptism of John (which means all that John taught concerning the Lord Jesus, Apollos also taught). Since what John taught concerning the Lord Jesus is not only important to our study of Apollos, but also important to our study of these twelve disciples in our text today, let us review what John the Baptist taught concerning Christ.

1. John taught that Jesus was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world—both believing Jews and believing Gentiles (John 1:29). He preached the death of Christ, and believed in the resurrection of Christ (since there is no redemptive value in a dead Savior, nor can the Son of God remain under the power of death).

2. John was Trinitarian, for he baptized Jesus (the Son of God), heard the Father speak from heaven (“This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17), and witnessed the Holy Spirit descend as a dove upon the Lord Jesus when he was baptized by John (Matthew 3:16).

3. John preached the gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ (John 3:27-36; Acts 19:4).

4. John administered water baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 19:5) as a sign of forgiveness (Luke 3:3), and preached that this water baptism was a picture of the spiritual baptism Jesus

would send upon believers (Mark 1:8).

5. John's ministry was "the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1). John's ministry was not "before" the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

6. Thus, even though John was martyred before he could witness the death and resurrection of Christ and before the blessed outpouring of God's Spirit upon His Church, he nevertheless believed and preached these truths. Thus, we concluded John the Baptist was a New Covenant believer as was Apollos.

B. Now with that in mind, let us turn to Acts 19 as we consider these 12 disciples that Paul meets in Ephesus.

1. Apollos was sent to Corinth with a blessing and letter of recommendation from the brethren in Ephesus (Acts 18:27). After Apollos left Ephesus for Corinth, Paul arrived in Ephesus as he had said he planned to do, if God willed it (Acts 18:21). Paul now finds and is introduced to "certain disciples" (Acts 19:1). Here is a clue from the very outset as whether these disciples were viewed as Old Testament believers or New Testament believers. When the word "disciples" occurs in the Book of Acts, it always refers to disciples of Jesus Christ (26 times).

2. Through Paul's conversation with these 12 Christian disciples, he must have picked up from them that their knowledge of what had already been accomplished in redemptive history was in some way deficient (like that of Apollos).

a. Therefore, Paul asks them, "Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed" (or more accurately "when ye believed"). Paul's question actually assumes that the gift of the Holy Spirit does not come ordinarily in two different stages (a first blessing and then a second blessing of the Holy Spirit), but rather comes when one believes in Jesus Christ as his/her Savior from the guilt and condemnation of sin. We'll come back to this issue in a few minutes when we take up the second main point.

b. These 12 disciples of Jesus Christ respond to Paul's question by saying, "We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost" (Acts 19:2). Now are they denying they had any knowledge of the person and work of the Holy Spirit, or are they speaking about a particular work of the Holy Spirit that was manifested to the Jewish disciples in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost? Most certainly, they are not denying any knowledge of the Holy Spirit (for the Old Testament and John the Baptist both taught about the person and work of the Holy Spirit, Mark 1:8). I submit that what they were saying is that they were deficient in this particular aspect of redemptive history: the enlarged blessing of the Holy Spirit beginning in Acts 2 (as was Apollos).

3. Paul then follows up with a second question (Acts 19:3): "Unto what then were ye baptized?" Because Paul sees their deficiency in knowledge of what the Lord Jesus gave to believers beginning in Acts 2, he sees that the issue here is of disciples of Christ who were caught in this transitional period between John the Baptist and the enlarged gift of the Holy Spirit from Christ in heaven in its New Covenant fullness (a greater degree of blessing and a greater extent of blessing to older and younger, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile). These disciples (like the apostles of Jesus Christ) had the indwelling Spirit before the death and resurrection of Christ (otherwise they could not have been saved, Romans 8:9), but the greater influence and work of the Holy Spirit after the Day of Pentecost was enlarged by way of gifts that included many Gentiles as the gospel went out into the world.

4. Remember what was noted earlier in the sermon that John taught and preached concerning Jesus Christ: His deity, His humanity, His sacrificial death for the forgiveness of sin (and by implication His resurrection), and His spiritual baptism (John just did not live to see it all accomplished, and therefore Apollos and these 12 disciples of Christ did not know of the blessedness of the New Testament fullness of Christ's gift of His Spirit to all those who believe in Jesus Christ).

5. Note what Paul says concerning John's baptism (Acts 19:4). It was a baptism of

repentance calling the people to believe on Jesus Christ (so was the baptism announced by Peter in Acts 2:38).

6. In fact, Paul continues in the next verse (Acts 19:5) by saying that those who heard John the Baptist preach were even “baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.” In other words, John’s baptism was in the name of the Lord Jesus (i.e. in the authority of the Lord Jesus) just as Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost. However, in Acts 19:5, are these the words of Paul referencing the baptism of those who believed in Christ through the preaching of John the Baptist (which was generally favored by the reformers of the First and Second Reformations), or are these the words of Luke referencing the rebaptism of the 12 disciples of Christ by the Apostle Paul (which is generally favored by modern scholars)? The flow of the passage moving from Acts 19:4 to Acts 19:5 is connected, for in verse 4 Paul gives **the Christian gospel** that John preached and in verse 5 Paul gives **the Christian baptism** that John administered (Acts 19:4 is connected to Acts 19:5 by the Greek conjunction *de* as in Acts 19:3,4). This answers some puzzling questions that would otherwise remain.

a. Were those who became apostles of Jesus Christ and were baptized with John’s baptism rebaptized (two disciples of John became disciples of Christ, one was Andrew, John 1:35-40?). If so, when?

b. When were the apostles of Jesus Christ baptized, before Pentecost or after (John 4:1-2)? If the apostles were baptizing those who became followers of Christ, they must have already been baptized themselves. Moreover, they could not baptize the thousands on the Day of Pentecost if they were not first baptized themselves (either the baptism of John or the baptism of Jesus—both before Pentecost). There is a continuity that flows from John the Baptist and his baptism (as New Testament baptism) to the disciples of the Lord Jesus and their baptism (as New Testament baptism) to those who were baptized on the Day of Pentecost (as New Testament baptism). John’s baptism may have been “the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1); it may have been transitional (just as was the ministry of Jesus Christ and His baptism of disciples); however, these were New Testament ministries accompanied by New Testament baptisms, all pointing to the gospel of Jesus Christ (to his death, resurrection). These 12 disciples in Ephesus did not need to be saved or baptized; they were already saved and they had already been baptized.

C. So why is this important?

1. Dear ones, to speak of multiple baptisms administered to any member of the Visible Church is to attack the singular and unrepeatable act of justification before God, and the spiritual baptism and cleansing that accompanies it. When we distort the signs and seals of God’s Covenant of Grace, we also distort the meaning and significance of those signs and seals and by our actions we distort and misrepresent what God accomplished (Ephesians 4:5). Therefore, I stand with our reformed forefathers who received all baptisms by ordained ministers professing the Trinity as valid baptisms that should not be repeated—including Roman Catholic baptism. Why? (1) The circumcision of the idolatrous kingdom of Israel (the ten tribes) was valid and not repeatable; (2) The papal antichrist sits in the temple (or church) of God, 2 Thessalonians 2:4. She may be a harlot and a corrupt Church from which we must flee (Revelation 18:4), but she is yet a Trinitarian Church that professes Christ (and not a non-Christian religion like Judaism or Islam), and the promise of salvation to all who trust alone in Jesus Christ is witnessed in baptism (even if it is rejected in the false gospel taught by Rome). The *Westminster Confession of Faith* (27:3) declares that the efficacy of a sacrament depends not “upon the piety or intention of him that doth administer it, but upon the work of the Spirit, and the word of institution.” The early reformers of the first reformation were baptized in the Church of Rome and rejected a second baptism after leaving it.

2. Also, because baptism is the sign and seal of the Covenant of Grace, to repeat baptism is to act as if the promises in the Covenant of Grace ceased or failed, and so the need to be baptized again. Remember that baptism is most importantly an objective sign and seal from God. God is saying to those members of the Visible Church (who enter as children or as adults) that He promises the cleansing of sin to all who trust alone in Christ alone and His confirmation of those promises is not only written, but is also testified

in an outward seal. If you are recommitting your life to Christ after having fallen away, you need not be baptized again for the promises of God have not changed—they never change while you yet breathe. You may change. I may change. But God's promises of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ will never change. The sacraments (Baptism and the Lord's Supper) are the visible gospel, even as the sermon is the preached gospel. Promises are attached to both the preached gospel and to the visible gospel. Dear ones, don't forget what your baptism means—it's God's promise to you. You will either use it for your benefit (as you believe the promise made in it), or you will use it for your destruction (as you refuse the promise made in it).

## **II. The One, Unrepeatable Acts of Spirit Baptism (Acts 19:6-7).**

A. After Paul taught and reminded these 12 disciples of the Lord Jesus that were in Ephesus what the baptism of John meant (and therefore what their baptism meant as a promise of salvation through Jesus Christ), he gave them what they were lacking (the New Covenant enlargement of the gift of the Holy Spirit) with the extraordinary gifts of speaking in tongues in foreign languages they had never learned and of prophesying in giving God's revelation to the Christ's Church.

B. What was the significance of this?

1. First, this is not an ordinary pattern that the Church of Jesus Christ is to follow. There is no indication that the 3,000 that were added to the Church on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) and who received the enlarged New Covenant gift of the Spirit had a similar experience to that of the Apostles in speaking in tongues (nor did the 5,000 that were added in Acts 4; nor did the multitudes who were added to the Church in Paul's first or second missionary journeys, nor did Lydia, nor did the Philippian jailer, nor did Apollos). Jesus told His disciples before He ascended into heaven that they would be witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea (Jews—Acts 2ff), Samaria (mixed Jews—Acts 8), and to the uttermost parts of the earth (Gentiles, beginning with Cornelius—Acts 10). In each of these instances the Lord gave the enlarged blessing of the Holy Spirit with extraordinary signs through the ministry of the apostles so that it would be evident to all that there was not to be a Jewish Church, a Samaritan Church, and a Gentile Church, but rather one Church of Jesus Christ all receiving one water baptism and all receiving the same spiritual baptism. This was a transitional period as the gospel was preached to various nationalities. No distinction was made between the, because each of them received the same Spirit with extraordinary signs. The normal pattern was that all believers received the gift of the Holy Spirit when they believed (Galatians 3:2,14; 1 Corinthians 12:13).

2. What's interesting is that Apollos was in the same situation as these 12 disciples (who only knew of the baptism and teaching of John the Baptist), and yet Apollos did not receive the enlarged blessing of Spirit baptism with the same extraordinary signs as did these 12 disciples. Why? Because the Apostle Paul was not present to witness it in the case of Apollos (Aquila and Priscilla were there), but in the case of these 12 disciples in Acts 19, the Apostle Paul was present to witness it (which again makes this very extraordinary rather than normal in as much as there are no longer apostles who witnessed the resurrected Christ, Acts 1:22; 1 Corinthians 15:8). These 12 disciples of the Lord Jesus were given the enlarged blessing of Spirit baptism accompanied by extraordinary signs so as to make clear that these transitional brethren were also included in the Church of Jesus Christ—they were not outsiders, but insiders. After this, there is not another extraordinary example like the ones you find in Acts 2 (Jews), Acts 8 (Samaritans), Acts 10 (Gentiles), and Acts 19 (transitional Christians).

3. Dear ones, the gift of the Holy Spirit (or baptism with the Holy Spirit) is a one-time gift (just like water baptism—in fact water baptism points to the promise of Spirit baptism just as physical circumcision pointed to the promise of spiritual circumcision). What is repeated and needed to be repeated in our lives is the filling of the Spirit (i.e. being controlled by the Holy Spirit, Ephesians 5:18—be continually filled with the Holy Spirit).

4. Beloved, it is the proud and vain person (whom Paul calls carnal and childish) who looks to that which is flashy and draws attention to itself; but it is the humble and lowly person (whom Paul calls spiritual and mature) who looks to that which builds up the Church of Jesus Christ (through spiritual gifts of encouragement, comfort, teaching, leading, serving, helping, praying). The more you are filled and controlled by the Holy Spirit, the more you will glorify the Lord through use of your gifts in service. If you can be filled and controlled by the Holy Spirit (which every Christian can), why then should that not be happening regularly in your life? Why should you be content with a little of the Holy Spirit when you could be filled with the Holy Spirit? It is true that we cannot have more of the Holy Spirit or less of the Holy Spirit (He cannot be divided into parts for He is an infinite Spirit), but we can either be a little under His control or we can be much under His control through the gospel, through communion with Christ, through studying God's Word, through daily prayer, and through loving obedience to God's Word. Why should we just eat the crumbs from the table of the Lord when we could feast at the table of the Lord? Dear ones, let us not be content with mediocrity, with lukewarmness, or with apathy. Lord Jesus set our hearts on fire with thy Holy Spirit. Amen.

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