

^{19:1} It happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the upper country and came to Ephesus, and found some disciples. ² He said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they *said* to him, “No, we have not even heard whether there is a Holy Spirit^a.” ³ And he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” And they said, “Into John’s baptism.” ⁴ Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus.” ⁵ When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ⁶ And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they *began* speaking with tongues and prophesying^b. ⁷ There were in all about twelve men.

⁸ And he entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading *them* about the kingdom of God. ⁹ But when some were becoming hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the people, he withdrew from them and took away the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. ¹⁰ This took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks^c.

^a 19:2 **He said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they said to him, “No, we have not even heard whether there is a Holy Spirit.”** It would be easy to assume that these disciples of John were saying that the concept of the Holy Spirit was new to them. That is likely not the case. First, the Hebrew Scriptures are full of references to the Spirit of God. Second, as disciples of John, these people would have been familiar with John’s words:

John answered and said to them all, “As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”
Luke 3:16

John prepared his disciples for the appearance of Messiah, but this group must have either missed the rest of the story on their pilgrimages to Jerusalem or (more likely) they were a product of the preaching of men like Apollos. It is possible that even Apollos himself had carefully persuaded these Jews to prepare for the coming Christ and baptized them.

^b 19:6 **And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking with tongues and prophesying.** The unusual events surrounding the coming of the Holy Spirit to these “Old Testament saints” are similar to events when the gospel first came to Jews, Samaritans and Gentiles. God welcomed different people groups on the “front lines” with spectacular displays of his power. As the good news reached Jews (Acts 2:1-13), Samaritans (8:14-19), Gentiles (10:44-48) and now these Disciples of John, the message was confirmed by the coming of the Spirit in a very public way.

The events of this transition time between the Old and New Testaments puzzle many Bible students. Questions like, “Should we be doing what they did?” and “Are we missing something?” can disturb conscientious disciples. It is important to recognize the distinction between, as John MacArthur puts it, “description and prescription” (*MacArthur’s Quick Reference to the Bible*, pp. 207-208).

The *descriptions* of events in any historic book of the Old or New Testament are displays of the glorious character and power of our awesome God. They are, however, worthy of imitation by the Church only within the boundaries of the *prescriptions* of the epistles. For instance, Moses describes the parting of the Red Sea in Exodus as a demonstration of God’s power but we are nowhere commanded to part seas. Luke describes the time Jesus sent out the seventy (or seventy-two) in groups of two and empowered them to trample serpents and scorpions but we are nowhere commanded to do likewise. The gospel writers describe Jesus giving the Great Commission to a small group. That command *is* repeated and prescribed for us in several places in the epistles.

^c 19:10 **This took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.** This was a very productive time for Paul. It was during his stay at Ephesus that he wrote the book of 1 Corinthians and trained missionaries. Many of the people of Asia who heard the word while Paul was in Ephesus were likely the inhabitants of the seven

¹¹ God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, ¹² so that handkerchiefs or aprons were even carried from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out^a. ¹³ But also some of the Jewish exorcists, who went from place to place, attempted to name over those who had the evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, “I adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preaches^b.” ¹⁴ Seven sons of one Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this^c. ¹⁵ And the evil spirit answered and said to them, “I recognize Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?” ¹⁶ And the man, in whom was the evil spirit, leaped on them and subdued all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded^d. ¹⁷ This became known to all, both Jews and Greeks, who lived in Ephesus; and fear fell upon them all and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified. ¹⁸ Many also of those

cities of the seven churches of Revelation (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea) and Colosse. Paul may not have started any of those churches but doubtless trained those who did.

^a 19:11-12 **God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were even carried from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out.** It is not recorded that Paul promoted the practice of having fabric taken from his person to the sick and infirm as some television preachers have done. This is God’s promotion, showing off what he can do through a faithful servant (see 19:15, where a demon publicly acknowledges Paul) as he did with Job (Job 1:8).

^b 19:13 **But also some of the Jewish exorcists, who went from place to place, attempted to name over those who had the evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, “I adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preaches.”** To some people Jesus is God the Son who loves, delivers, and transforms repentant sinners. To others Jesus is a means to their end—a way to get power and notoriety.

Demon possession is evidently not something that can only be diagnosed by someone who is spiritually sensitive. Even these men devoid of the Spirit recognized that people were inhabited by demons and that the creatures needed to leave.

^c 19:14 **Seven sons of one Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this.** The recurring idolatrous craving in the book of Acts is power. So often in Acts you see people who lust after power running into real power.

- The religious leaders in Jerusalem wished to show their power over the apostles, but could not stop them (Acts 4, 5).
- Saul thought his position of bounty hunter under the Chief Priest authority could stop the message of Jesus, but he met resurrection power on a trip to Damascus (Acts 7, 9).
- Simon the Samaritan Sorcerer (8:9-24) wanted to pay tuition for the training in giving the Spirit, but had no power even to pray.
- Herod Agrippa I thought he ruled an entire region, but he could neither keep Peter in prison or himself alive (Acts 12).
- Bar-Jesus the sorcerer wanted to hold on to his power over the proconsul of Cyprus, but wandered blind for a time (13:4-12).
- The owners of a demon-possessed slave girl used her to make money for themselves, but could not resist the power of the risen Christ to rescue the girl (16:16-21).
- Here the sons of Sceva were impressed with the way Paul’s exorcisms made him look and tried it themselves, but with perilous results.

^d 19:16 **And the man, in whom was the evil spirit, leaped on them and subdued all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.** It is not hard to imagine Luke smiling as he added this detail. The purpose of this detail, however, is not humor but an additional witness to the superiority of Jesus Christ (not just the pronunciation of his name) over demonic spirits.

who had believed kept coming, confessing and disclosing their practices^a.¹⁹ And many of those who practiced magic brought their books together and *began* burning them in the sight of everyone; and they counted up the price of them and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver.²⁰ So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing^b.

²¹ Now after these things were finished, Paul purposed in the Spirit to go to Jerusalem after he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome."²² And having sent into Macedonia two of those who ministered to him, Timothy and Erastus, he himself stayed in Asia for a while.^c

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^a 19:18 **Many also of those who had believed kept coming, confessing and disclosing their practices.** "Those who believed" had clutter to eliminate from their lives. The remedy was not a special mystical deliverance service, but confession and a renouncing of sinful practices.

^b 19:20 **So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing.** Paul told the Romans that wickedness suppresses the truth (1:18). The word did not become something else when the Ephesian believers renounced their evil practices. It brought men to obedience, which then became an advertisement of its power to change lives. God's word has a more powerful influence when it is turned loose and becomes known.

^c 19:1-22 We need to understand God's way to minister in satanic strongholds.

1. Make sure you have a clear message to present. Even many Christians are unsure what the gospel is. The answer to confusion is a clear presentation of the gospel. Like Apollos, these disciples of John had an incomplete message. Ours is not to face confused people with anger but with the saving message.
2. Place a high priority on instruction (as opposed to creating experiences). Paul, in and out of the synagogue, exemplified for us what is commanded in the epistles. The priority of the church must be biblical instruction and application.
3. Seek the propagation of the gospel where it has not been heard. Asia heard because Paul taught and applied the Scriptures. Our missionary outreach ought to have a foundation in disciple-making and a target of reaching unreached people.
4. View sin (not demons) as the primary issue in the church. The way to deal with the devil is to resist him. Christians ought to be challenged to burn bridges to the sins of their past. This displays the power of God's word and the change it brings.