

## **Who Do You Follow? — Rev. Denise Stone**

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH BIG FLATS NY, 7-21-19**

Today we finish our study of the Spirit's Work as seen in the Book of Acts. Over the last few weeks we have seen how the Spirit directed the disciples and the early church to reach out from Jerusalem and Samaria and to begin reaching out to the "Ends of the Earth."

We have traveled to Ephesus, which was a city located in modern Turkey for today's passage. This particular passage has provoked much conversation (and division) within the church over the centuries. Questions have been raised like do you have to be baptized a second time in certain situations, do you have to be able to speak in tongues to be a "real" Christian?

I'll be touching on these issues to provide some background for you. Note, however, they are not THE question that comes from this text.

For this sermon, I want to ask you to have the question "Who Do You Follow?" in your mind.

As I said this passage has been a point of controversy for the church. There are 12 men that Paul encounters in Ephesus. They are leaders of the church there, having learned from the evangelist Apollos – who is spoken of highly in various places. However, it is made clear in the prior chapter of Acts that Apollos did not have a complete understanding of what it meant to follow Jesus and was given further direction from Priscilla and Aquilla.

Apollos has just left Ephesus to go to another city and Paul arrives. Paul meets these 12 men and because they are leaders, he asks them if they had received the Holy Spirit. They did not even know what that was. So Paul digs a little deeper – have they been baptized and exactly what baptism it was? Turns out they were baptized under John's Baptism which was a baptism of repentance, but not under the Baptism of Jesus, which leads to the Holy Spirit and Salvation.

When they heard this from Paul, they were baptized – not really re-baptized but baptized for the first time as true believers in Jesus. Paul laid his hands on them and the men received the gift of the Holy Spirit and began speaking in various tongues (languages) as happened first at Pentecost. Paul stayed in Ephesus for up to two of years, adding to the teaching that the church had already received and spreading the news of Jesus in the area.

For whatever reason Paul sensed something was not complete in the men in Ephesus, and that is what prompted his questioning. We don't know what that something was but Paul detected that perhaps their knowledge and belief in Jesus was lacking.

He asks about whether they had received the gift of the Holy Spirit and the men were at a loss. So Paul asks the men into what it was they were baptized. It was John's baptism. This provided a teaching opportunity for Paul to distinguish from being baptized under John's teachings, which was of repentance while waiting for the coming of Jesus to be baptized as a believer in Jesus, where evidence of that belief and Salvation is given.

A quick aside: know that you do not need to be baptized to be a Christian. Baptism is a **symbol** of one's belief in and belonging to Jesus. It is not a method of Salvation. Many Christian denominations baptize infants and children symbolizing that they belong to God. They are not old enough to make that decision on their own, but as a church we say they belong to God **and** that they are our responsibility. Confirmation classes are held when children are old enough to understand the elements of faith and then they are given an opportunity to publicly declare their belief in Jesus.

Back to the text: what happens with these men in Ephesus? They learn that they have not had all of the information about Jesus - their belief was only in part. So they are baptized as true believers in Jesus. And they receive the Holy Spirit and speak in languages other than their own.

Speaking in tongues is only one gift of the Spirit. There are others- some visible and some not. We should not allow ourselves to get hung up on who has what gift and does that “make us” a real Christian.

Author, Frank L. Crouch, put it this way,

“Paul's first question to the believers is not "how were you baptized?" (although he does get around to that). His first question is whether they have received the Holy Spirit (19:2). [That is,] Do they live their lives aware of, open to, filled with, and guided by the Spirit of God?”<sup>i</sup>

Another author, Kenneth Sauer, posed the following:

Most of us also know the gist of the gospel message. We try to live good Christian lives. We have a high sense of moral responsibility. But have we truly died to self and been raised to life in Christ Jesus the Lord? Have we received the Holy Spirit? Have we received the power of God's grace? This is what it

means to be baptized into the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. It means that we have invited God into our lives and that God is at work in our lives through the power of His Holy Spirit. It means that we really are different than we were before we had even heard that there was a Holy Spirit. It means that we are no longer merely our own, but that we have been bought with a price. We now belong to God, and what a reason to be thankful! <sup>ii</sup>

The question for us today is “Who Do You Follow?” Is your faith in Jesus life giving? Does your life show evidence of transformation as the result of your belief in Jesus Christ?

The men in Ephesus thought they were followers of Jesus, but they learned that their faith was incomplete. They did not know who the Holy Spirit was and they found themselves lacking. It turns out that they were really following John the Baptist. And while that was good and there was obviously a continuity of the message of John and the new life made available in Jesus, it was not true Christianity. The text doesn't say this, but that is why they felt compelled to be baptized. And when Paul laid his hands on them that is when they received the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The point of this sermon is not to make anyone question whether or not they are saved – if you have affirmed your belief in God and offered your life to Christ then you are a Christian.

But also know that there is no way for us sitting here to look around this room or around our community and know who is truly a Christian. That is why the central question of this text is “Who Do You Follow?”

Frank Crouch went on to say in his article,

Ultimately our life in Christ is not just about any particular event(s) that might have taken place in the early (or later) days of our faith. Those moments -- if and when they happen -- are gifts from God to be treasured, but they constitute starting points, not ending points. After Paul laid on his hands and they spoke in tongues and prophesied, they were not, therefore, finished. Although this assigned periscope (or our text) ends here, the believers' stories do not. They still had much to learn and much to bring to life as the Spirit moved them.

Our stories, likewise, do not stop when we became a Christian. That was just the starting point. Like the men in Ephesus, their baptism of repentance was a starting point and they had much to learn. We have much to learn.

Our life in Christ is NEVER complete. We need to be continually learning and growing in our faith. You don't just serve God for a period of time and then retire from your life as a servant of God. It is a lifelong endeavor.

When you think about "Who Do You Follow" – do you really follow Jesus or do you follow some watered-down version of Christianity that is comfortable and requests very little of you.

As I was working on this Sermon this week I came across a saying posted on Facebook that I thought was timely. It said to Put Christ Back in Christianity, specifically to

## **Put Christ Back In Christianity**

**Love God • Love Your  
Neighbor As You Do Yourself •  
Forgive 70 x 7 • Whoever Is  
Without Sin Cast The First  
Stone • Treat Others The Way  
You Want To Be Treated •  
Feed The Hungry • Don't  
Return Evil For Evil • Visit  
Those In Prison • Clothe The  
Naked • House The Homeless  
• Welcome The Foreigner •  
Don't Judge • Care For The  
Sick • Love One Another As I  
Have Loved You**

Today, as we end this particular series about the Spirit's work as seen in the Book of Acts, let me leave you with this slightly edited portion again from Kenneth Sauer, being a follower of Jesus Christ



“...means that we have invited God into our lives and that God is at work in our lives through the power of His Holy Spirit. It means that we really are different than we were before we had even heard that there was a Holy Spirit. It means that we are no longer merely our own, but that we have been bought with a price. **We now belong to God, and what a reason to be thankful!**”<sup>iii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1167](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1167)

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/the-power-of-conversion-kenneth-sauer-sermon-on-baptism-87052?ref=SermonSerps>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/the-power-of-conversion-kenneth-sauer-sermon-on-baptism-87052?ref=SermonSerps>