

One God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

11. STARTING WITH THE SPIRIT

Acts 19v1-7

In Friday's edition of 'The Times', (13. 4. 07) Dr. Thomas Stuttaford's "Health" column was about 'Dangerous Deliveries'. He is not at all happy about the campaign for more home births. He believes the risks involved are too high. But one phrase leapt out for me from his article. *"The manner of birth could determine a person's life for 80 years or more."* In other words, a healthy delivery is important for a baby, not just at the time, but also for the long term.

So too, the start you get in your Christian life is crucial. The manner of your "delivery" at the beginning is important for the rest of your life.

Acts 19v1-7 is our text today and next week, and it helps us explore what it means to have a healthy delivery when coming to faith. And we will see that starting with the Spirit is part of a healthy delivery for a newly born believer.

1. A new born believer needs a healthy delivery.

v1,2. While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, "Did you receive the Spirit when you believed?"

Debate on this text often centres on whether these "disciples" at Ephesus were Christians or not when Paul asked this question. Opinion is divided. Some say "yes", they were full Christians because the word "**disciple**" is only ever used of Christians, and Paul says "**when**" you believed. Some say "no". Paul asked the question because he didn't think they were believers; he saw no evidence of the Spirit in their lives.

I think David Pawson approaches this incident from a far more helpful angle when he suggests that Paul is checking that these men have been properly birthed as new Christians.

In a book written back in 1989 called 'The Normal Christian Birth', David argues that *"complete initiation"* into the Christian faith consists of four elements: repentance towards God, believing in Jesus, being baptised in water and receiving the Holy Spirit in some unmistakable way. He writes *"When any of the four elements is lacking, steps need to be taken to supply the deficiency."*

These same things are listed as the four most basic ingredients for a Christian in Hebrews 6v1f: *"Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands..."*

So in this incident Paul is checking on their spiritual delivery. Perhaps something alerted him to ask the question. Perhaps not! He may just have been one of those in-your-face people who ask uncomfortable questions.

Look at the way the conversation goes, but do so with a personal interest. Ask yourself how this conversation might go with you. Check out the four elements of a healthy delivery in your experience. You might discover an explanation for some of the struggles you have had in your Christian life.

In v 2: His starting point is a question about the Spirit because he begins by assuming the best. **“Did you receive the Spirit when you believed?”** A more literal translation would be **“Having believed, did you receive the Spirit?”** This had been an issue in Samaria when many had come to faith during a dramatic spiritual breakthrough. But while Philip the evangelist had his strengths, bringing new converts through to receiving the Spirit was not one of them. *‘When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.’* (Acts 8v14 -17)

v2: They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." It sounds like they were totally ignorant of even the existence of the Spirit; but this is highly unlikely. Literally, they reply, **“We have not heard that Holy Spirit is...”** Their words tail off into an unfinished sentence! What they were probably saying was *“We have not heard that the Holy Spirit is given”*. They would know of John the Baptist’s prophecy that the Messiah would baptise with the Holy Spirit, but they hadn’t heard about it happening yet. Whatever they meant their answer sets off all of Paul’s alarm bells.

v3: So Paul asks **"Then what baptism did you receive?"** They answer: **"John's baptism,"** Again their reply shows the limitations of their faith. *“Their baptism had been a genuine expression of repentance towards God, but it had not been a personal act of faith in the Lord Jesus.”* (Pawson) They had believed what John the Baptist had said about Jesus being the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. But they didn’t know the full story of Jesus and believe *in Jesus*.

By this stage Paul realises that these disciples are only ‘through’ on one of the four elements of a healthy spiritual delivery. They are clear about repentance, but they have no personal faith in Christ, they haven’t been baptised as believers and they have not received the Holy Spirit.

v4-6: So Paul becomes a spiritual midwife and begins by leading them to faith *in Jesus*, rather than belief *about Jesus*. **Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this they were baptised into the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy**

Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.' Their delivery as spiritual babies is now complete.

So a normal healthy Christian birth should include repentance, faith, water baptism and receiving the Holy Spirit. But this is not how everyone sees it. In fact this can be a delicate subject in some quarters. The great American evangelist Billy Graham has worked with many churches from different denominations in his crusades; but because of various different theological views about water baptism and the Holy Spirit neither he nor his counsellors mention baptism in water or receiving the Spirit when they lead people to faith in Christ. Dr. Graham has conducted over 400 Crusades and has preached to around 214 million people worldwide. Millions have come to faith through his ministry. But very few of these knew on "day one" about water baptism or receiving the Holy Spirit. I'm not speaking against Billy Graham. He is one of my heroes and one of the greats of the 20th Century.

Paul and the other apostles were passionate about how believers were birthed. They believed that every new Christian deserved a healthy spiritual delivery. They expected baby Christians to be instructed about repentance, faith in Christ, water baptism, and to have prayer to receive the Holy Spirit.

What about you? How was your spiritual delivery? Some of us came to faith long ago, but for others here the question may be a big issue right now.

- **Have you shown repentance towards God?**

Is there evidence of genuine repentance in my life and yours? Do we now hate sin and long to please God? Repentance involves a major turn-around and some massive mind-set changes. But if it is a matter of a quick prayer rather than a radical reappraisal of our lifestyle, then our growth in maturity as believers will be stunted. In today's culture there are so many head-on clashes with basic Christian living that it is easy to fudge it when we speak of sin and repentance with new-born Christians. Yes, we do need to be patient and gentle with new believers and understand that it can take time for change to come about. But even when their lives are messy and full of baggage we need to make sure that the person is committed to living a righteous life.

- **Have you put your faith in Christ?**

Do you trust in Christ's atoning death alone for salvation rather than our own efforts? If this is not as clear as crystal it can result in years of uncertainty and legalism. Am I good enough? Am I really accepted by God? Am I doing enough for God? Perhaps I will lose my salvation.

- **Have you been baptised in water as a believer?**

In baptism you confess that Jesus is your Lord. This is what we teach new Christians among us. In 'Acts' every new believer was baptised in water. If you came to Christ years ago without being baptised as a believer we are not going to put any pressure on you now. But you may decide that this is something that you want to do.

- Did you receive the Spirit when you believed?

Paul would not have asked this question if he thought that everything belonging to the Spirit came automatically when you are born again. Even though Paul knew that it was impossible to be spiritually alive without the work of the Spirit, he still asked the question. "Did you receive the Spirit when you believed?" He was talking about receiving the Spirit in some unmistakable way, subsequent to and quite distinct from salvation.

If Paul were to ask me this same question, "Did you receive the Spirit when you believed?" my answer would have to be "no!" All my early instruction as a new believer was in a Baptist church where the sermons I heard and the books I read all taught me that such things had ceased. Receiving the Spirit in this way was just for New Testament times. I was taught about water baptism but no one taught me about Spirit baptism. No one prayed with me to receive the Spirit. I was clearly born again but I struggled for years before I understood that baptism in the Spirit and spiritual gifts were for today.

Remember Dr. Stuttaford's words. *"The manner of birth could determine a person's life for 80 years or more."*

If you missed out on something during your spiritual delivery it is not your fault. It may not be the fault of those who led you to Christ and nurtured you, because they may have missed out too! But rather than apportioning blame and feeling sorry for ourselves, we can do something about it now.

Paul took steps "to supply the deficiency" of these disciples immediately. He didn't just question them and correct their doctrine. He made sure they were clear about believing in Jesus, that they were baptised in water, and then he laid hands on them to receive the Spirit. And they did!

2. A healthy delivery includes receiving the Spirit.

You will know if you have received the Spirit. Paul certainly expected these men to know when he asked, "**Did you receive the Spirit when you believed?**" This is something you *experience*, not something you just have to believe you have received. Receiving the Spirit involves some unmistakable demonstration of the Spirit, some sign of His presence.

There is a dramatic illustration of this earlier in 'Acts'. John and Peter pray for the new believers in Samaria to receive the Spirit and they do! A local sorcerer is very impressed. *"When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostle's hands, he offered them money and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."* (Acts 8v18f)

So what happened with these Ephesian disciples? After Paul had helped them understand the difference between believing *about* Jesus and faith *in* Jesus and they were baptised in water, we read: **v6,7: When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. There were about twelve men in all.** The Holy Spirit made

Himself known very clearly. There was a tangible demonstration of the Spirit. If Paul were to ask them again "Did you receive the Spirit?" they would answer "O yes!" So let us look at the way they experienced the Spirit.

- Paul placed his hands on them.

Throughout the Bible this is something that accompanies focussed prayer for blessing and the anointing of God's Spirit. Paul's own spiritual delivery had included this. A few days after his life-changing encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus we read that Ananias visited him: "*Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord - Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here - has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."* (Acts 9v17) Now, here at Ephesus Paul placing his hands on these men at tells us something very important. Each person receives the Spirit individually. This was not a collective group experience like the apostles at Pentecost. They received the Spirit one by one. And so do you. The Holy Spirit is a Person and He treats you and me as persons.

- The Holy Spirit came on them.

Elsewhere in 'Acts' we find expressions like "*fell upon*", "*came upon*" and "*poured out upon*", describing people's experience of receiving the Spirit. For example, the prophecy of Joel: "*In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people*". (Acts 2v17) "*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.*" (Acts 1v8) "*While Peter was still speaking.. the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.*" (Acts 10v 44) This "coming upon" of the Holy Spirit tells us this is something out of the ordinary; the kind of thing that doesn't happen every day of the week. This is something sudden rather than gradual. This is God in action!

- They spoke in tongues and prophesied.

Receiving the Spirit resulted in two kinds of *speech*; speech in unknown languages and speech in their native language. But the speech was spontaneous not a set of words being repeated. It was speech touched by the Holy Spirit. Their hearts were overflowing. This is entirely consistent with another expression used for receiving the Spirit – "filled with the Spirit". When you are filled you overflow.

They spoke in tongues: They overflowed with praise to God in a language other than their native tongue. When you speak in this way your spirit is engaged with God while your mind is by-passed. There is something unselfconscious about this. You are taken up with God; captivated by Him. A better translation than 'tongues' would be "languages". "Tongues" has connotations of babbling for some people. And there is no suggestion that the person is "taken over", so the New English Bible's translation of "ecstatic utterances" is misleading.

They prophesied. They also overflowed by speaking out messages from God in their own language. Prophesying is the very sign the prophet Joel said would accompany the pouring out of the Spirit. (Joel 2v28f; Acts 2v17ff)

Having seen what happened to these men we need to ask two questions.

Is this the way everyone receives the Spirit?

- Will we need to have hands placed upon us?

No! You can receive the Spirit without having hands laid on you because it is God who gives the Spirit not a few super-Christians. This is *God's Spirit* we are talking about! In Acts 10 we see this with the Roman centurion Cornelius and his household. God pours out His Spirit on them while Peter watches open-mouthed. The Spirit does not belong to apostles or church leaders or super-anointed platform speakers. Prayer needs to accompany the laying on of hands because God is the one who gives the Spirit. (Acts 8v15ff) Never forget who the Giver is. Having said all this, many, like myself, receive the Spirit with someone laying hands and praying. If you are as desperate as I was you will be only too eager to get someone to pray for you. But when this happens it is still God you should be looking to, not the one praying.

- Will we receive the Spirit immediately?

Not necessarily. A common mistake is to assume that receiving the Holy Spirit always takes place in response to the first prayer, and if it doesn't we conclude that we are not good enough. Jesus spoke on one occasion about persevering in prayer for the Holy Spirit. *"So I say to you: keep on asking and it will be given to you; keep on seeking and you will find; keep on knocking and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"* (Luke 11v9-13) Keep on asking until you receive.

- Will we all speak in tongues and prophecy?

Classic Pentecostalism teaches that speaking in 'tongues' is the definitive evidence of having received the Spirit. In other words, if you haven't spoken in tongues you haven't received the Spirit. They point out that the apostles spoke in tongues at Pentecost. Peter also heard Cornelius and his household *"speaking in tongues and praising God."* (Acts 10v46) And here at Antioch these men speak in tongues.

But are three examples enough to make this claim for tongues as the definitive sign that you have received the Spirit? There is no apostolic teaching that tongues must accompany receiving the Spirit. The 'tongues' at Pentecost were actual known languages. And in our text today some may have spoken in unknown languages and others prophesied in their own native tongue. And what about the many mighty spiritual giants throughout church history, and in our own day, who do not seem to have ever spoken in tongues? Had they not received the Spirit? Many of them had extraordinary experiences of the Spirit of God without speaking in tongues.

But if receiving the Spirit is not always with tongues what might make the experience unmistakable? Surely it must be more than a warm feeling! This is a dynamic encounter with the Spirit of God!

Sometimes when people are filled with the Spirit they shake like a leaf in the wind. The Hebrew word for Spirit is the same as “wind” or “breath”. Some, like myself, feel like they are on top of Everest breathing in air that is fresh and intoxicating! Others do experience heat, sometimes in their hands or even all over their body. Jesus baptises with the Spirit and with fire! (Luke 3v16)

Receiving the Spirit in these (and other ways) invariably results in a sudden explosion of spontaneous praise in your own language. There are examples of this in the New Testament. *“Jesus is Lord”* is one such expression mentioned by Paul. (1 Corinthians 12v3) It is a spontaneous shout of recognition. The same thing is true of the cry *“Abba”, “Father!”* *“For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.”* (Romans 8v15f)

Or, of course, you might explode with praise in an unknown language! You may experience a bubbling up within you and an urge to express praise to God. You find a sound or a word coming to your lips. If this happens, speak it out. This is the first sign of tongues. Go with it and you will find other words flowing which express love to God. It might only be a few words to begin with.

What difference does receiving the Spirit make?

Receiving the Spirit is not a mark of spiritual maturity. On the contrary it is meant to happen as soon as possible after we have been born again as brand new spiritual babies! It is part of our healthy delivery. Nor does it *make us* instantly mature or holy! Nevertheless receiving the Spirit makes such a difference to the way we grow and mature as believers, in these ways:

- **Power to bear witness to Jesus**

The apostles experienced this at Pentecost, and it is often so still today. Terry Virgo recalls, *“One day, as I was strolling along Brighton seafront, I saw some people witnessing. I had just been leading the youth group Bible Study and was feeling quite pleased with my performance. There on the lower promenade were these Pentecostal, grey-haired, frail old ladies holding banners and speaking about Jesus with crackly voices. People were thrwing things at them and laughing at them. I stood there in my dark glasses, watching what was happening. It was not a pretty sight. ‘O God, why is it like this?’ I thought. Then suddenly I realised that God had called young men like me to do this sort of thing, not frail old ladies. ‘But I’d rather die than do that!’ I protested. There were two guys standing nearby. They were sneering, “Look at those old fools, why don’t they keep their religion to themselves?” The Lord prompted me, “At least speak to them about Jesus.” But I stood there thinking, “I can’t, I just can’t do it.” I went home broken. People knew I was a church-goer, but I was frightened to acknowledge the name of Jesus. I just couldn’t*

Speak to people about Him. I felt so ashamed, and I was desperate to know how I could overcome my reluctance.

The next morning I phoned a Pentecostal friend and asked him to meet me for lunch near my work place. We often had lunch together and he would always witness to anyone who shared our table. I envied his liberty and admired his boldness. But I almost died every time he spoke about Jesus and wanted him to be quiet. When we parted I would watch him walking down Oxford Street giving out tracts as he went. Now I had to see him. I had to know what made him tick. So when we met for lunch I asked him, "How can you witness so freely? What's the secret? He replied, "I've received the Holy Spirit." So that was the answer to his boldness – the Holy Spirit. I had a knowledge of the Bible and could lead studies, but now I realised that I needed to be filled with the Holy Spirit as well. "I must have what you've got," I told him. I felt just like those disciples of Jesus. They all denied Him. They all fled. They were all disillusioned and frightened. They all hid behind barred doors. The cross revealed their weakness. But Jesus did not leave them helpless. Later He appeared to them and said: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses." (Acts 1v8). (Terry Virgo & Phil Rogers. 'Receiving the Holy Spirit and His Gifts.' Word Books. 1990)

The Spirit gives us power to be witnesses to Jesus. The apostles were transformed by the Spirit coming upon them. They preached fearlessly, saw thousands turn to Christ. And because of the power of the Spirit they also saw mighty miracles. They prayed for the sick and they were healed and saw others set free from bondage. The same Spirit is promised to us.

- Assurance of God's love

Receiving the Spirit often brings a glorious assurance of God's love. After crying out to God to be filled with the Holy Spirit the late nineteenth century American evangelist D.L. Moody had an overwhelming experience in New York on 5th Avenue, Broadway. *"God Almighty seemed to come very near. I felt I must be alone"* He went to the home of a friend nearby & asked for a room. Moody locked the door and sat on the sofa. The room seemed ablaze with God. He dropped to the floor. *"I can only say that God revealed Himself to me, and I had such an experience of His love that I had to ask Him to stay His hand".* (See Romans 8v15f again.)

Ephesians 1v13,14 could almost be a summary of what had happened to these men at Ephesus. Perhaps it was addressed to them especially, and they were among its first readers. *"Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession - to the praise of his glory."* *"Having believed"* in Jesus the Holy Spirit confirms that you are God's and this brings great security and assurance. The Spirit is a "seal" in their lives, a sign of ownership and authenticity. He is also a "guarantee". The Greek word here means a first instalment, a down payment which guarantees that the transaction will be completed. So the Spirit is both a seal of authenticity and a foretaste and guarantee of something even more wonderful to come. We are God's people of the Spirit.

For many, this experience of God's love through receiving the Spirit means that their love for God ceases to be cold or formal. They may have been inhibited but now they find themselves set free. They might begin to feel strong emotions of love for God or thanks to God. Every relationship of love expresses emotions. The Bible talks about loving God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. (Mark 12v30) The Spirit helps you to do this. And 'tongues' is precisely what many need in order to be released in worship and extravagant expressions of love to God.

- An inner stream of living water

Jesus said: "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him. By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified." (John 7v37-39) Having received the Spirit Jesus promises that we will enjoy streams of living water flowing within us! How can this be? Because we are now connected to Jesus, the Source!

Receiving the Spirit is just your introduction to the realm of the Spirit. It is your first "filling". We can "go on being filled with the Spirit". (Ephesians 5v18) We see this in action in Acts 4 v8 where Peter is filled with the Spirit as he faces the same powerful men who had condemned Jesus to death weeks earlier, and in Acts 13v9 where Paul is filled with the Spirit to deal with a man steeped in the occult, called Elymas. Stephen was so renowned for being filled with the Spirit that he came to be defined by this and is described as "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 6v3) Receiving the Spirit also becomes the catalyst for receiving spiritual gifts. The gift of the Spirit (*charisma* - singular) brings the gifts of the Spirit (*charismata* - plural). Because you are connected to the Source you can now receive all that the Spirit has for you.

If you know you have already received the Spirit.

You can go on experiencing more of God by the Spirit. But this is different from the first "filling." You now have a stream of living water within you. *"Having once been filled from the outside, one can continue to be filled from the inside. The Spirit has come to dwell."* (David Pawson) You can ask the Spirit to fill you afresh.

If you are not sure that you have received the Spirit

You can come to Jesus now. Jesus Himself said: *"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink."* (John 7v37) When you are really thirsty you keep searching for water. Are you thirsty? You may be conscious of being thirsty for more passion for Jesus, or thirsty for more of the presence of God in worship, or thirsty for power to share the gospel, or thirsty for more experience of the love of God, or thirsty for the gifts of the Spirit, or simply thirsty for everything God has for you. But you need to be thirsty and ask, and *keep on asking* - and believe as you ask that you will receive.

John Wilthew. April 2007

