

WHAT'S MISSING FROM THE MODERN CHURCH?

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By the Book™ A Chapter by Chapter Bible Study Series from Jerry Vines Ministries
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Let's Begin

There is a missing note in the modern church. Books are written in search of it. Magazine articles discuss it. People go from church to church, like weary travelers in the desert, trying to find it. New programs are established to recover it. Like a song missing a note, so the modern church makes an uncertain sound.

When Paul arrived at Ephesus, he discovered something amiss not unlike today. Noticing a lack of authentic spiritual presence, Paul asked, "Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed?" (v. 2). The question he asked the Ephesian disciples is the question we pursue today.

As we explore chapter 19 for the answer, let's follow the outline below:

- I. **The Plight of the Ephesian Disciples (vv. 1-3)**
- II. **The Provision for the Ephesian Disciples (vv. 4-7)**
- III. **The Power of the Ephesian Disciples (vv. 8-10)**
- IV. **The Purpose of the Ephesian Disciples (vv. 11-41)**

I. The Plight of the Ephesian Disciples (vv. 1-3)

Paul stayed about a year and a half in Corinth (18:11), discipling Priscilla and Aquila in the faith and strengthening the new church he established. Afterward, Paul followed the coast and arrived at Ephesus (v. 1). Like Corinth, he soon found disciples with whom to converse (cp. 18:1-2); yet unlike Priscilla and Aquila, the Ephesian disciples struck Paul as spiritually deficient, "Paul having passed through the upper coasts came to Ephesus: and finding certain disciples, He said unto them, Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed? And they said unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost. And he said unto them, Unto what then were ye baptized? And they said, Unto John's baptism" (vv. 1-3). What was missing from the disciples' experience, which prompted Paul's question, "Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed?" Two impressions are noteworthy.

First, they impressed upon Paul their *spiritual impotence*. They obviously lacked a visible presence concerning their relationship to God. In other words, they had no spiritual power. The modern church has progressed impressively through the centuries. We have sophisticated organization of all our ministries—Sunday school, discipleship, charitable ministries, global missions, etc. Furthermore, our facilities are enormous, our buildings adequate, and our resources unprecedented. Even more, we have highly trained pastors, musicians, and experts in every conceivable field. In fact, the church has never been so perfectly organized as today. Why, then, is the church less effective than it was 2000 years ago? Could it be the impression Paul would receive from us would be similar to the impression he received from the Ephesian disciples? Where is the spiritual power?

A note needs to be added here concerning an unfortunate interpretation surrounding the term "since" (v. 2). The way it is translated has led to some erroneous teaching which indicates the Spirit comes upon the believer as a subsequent

Where is the spiritual power?



experience. The Greek does not support such interpretation. Instead, the tense of the participle and verb point to a simultaneous act. In other words, the believing and the receiving remain together. Perhaps a better translation to communicate to us today is offered by Kenneth Wuest: “Did ye receive the Holy Spirit, having believed?”

Someone put it this way, “The average Christian is somewhere between Calvary and Pentecost. They have been to Calvary for pardon but they have not been to Pentecost for power.” Bethlehem means “God with us.” Calvary means “God for us.” And Pentecost means “God in us.” The Lord Jesus talked about the Pentecostal difference when He said these words, “He is with you and He shall be in you” (John 14:17).

*Did ye receive
the Holy
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believed?*

Reflection Connection

When you think of “spiritual power,” what comes to mind? Be specific. Do you think the church possesses the marks of spiritual power? Why or why not?

Second, they impressed upon Paul their *spiritual incompleteness*. The Ephesian disciples lacked spiritual power. In addition, according to their own testimony, they only knew the baptism of John (v. 3). At this point, the Apostle Paul

instructed them in the true faith. Luke wrote, “When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus” (v. 5). John’s witness was a true witness, a heavenly witness (John 1:6-8). Nevertheless, his witness was preparatory only (Matt. 3:3, 11). The Ephesian disciples knew John, but didn’t know Jesus.

Observe: it’s not enough to know a true witness — even a heavenly witness — yet not know Jesus. At their spiritual core, the Ephesian disciples were unbelievers, never having experienced a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. The problem is real today. People have their name on the church roll but not in the Lamb’s Book of Life. How would the Apostle Paul be impressed with us? Would he detect a plight of spiritual impotence or incompleteness?

II. The Provision for the Ephesian Disciples (vv. 4-7)

Paul’s answer to their plight was to provide the Gospel. He called upon the Ephesians to believe on the Lord Jesus, “Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus” (v. 4). No amount of good deeds could help the Ephesian disciples. Their spiritual problem was not behavior but belief, the same problem Corinth faced (18:8, 27).

The disciples heard the word with gladness, believed on the Lord Jesus, and Paul baptized them (v. 5). In addition, what God did next removed any impression that the Holy Spirit was absent, “And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them; and they spake with tongues, and prophesied” (v. 6).

For the Holy Spirit to be present in a person’s life, a genuine experience with Jesus is prerequisite. Joining the church won’t do it, nor will the experience of others. A person must be able to say, “He is *my* Lord and *my* Savior.”



Reflection Connection

How would you characterize “being filled with the Holy Spirit”? Do you think the filling of the Spirit is a repeatable event? Why or why not?

Reflection Connection

On a scale of 1 to 10 (one being weakest and 10 strongest), how would you rate evangelism in today’s church? Explain. What programs does your church promote in doing evangelism?

After, the disciples *experienced* salvation, they were *endued* with the Spirit, “the Holy Ghost came upon.” They had the Spirit, and now the Spirit had them!

In Acts, the Holy Spirit came upon people in different ways. In Acts 2, the Spirit came as a “rushing mighty wind” and “tongues of fire” (Acts 2:1-4). In Acts 10, the Holy Spirit came in deep conviction in Cornelius’ heart even before Peter stopped preaching! (Acts 10:44-48). The point simply is: we can’t regiment the Holy Spirit. He is sovereign; He is God.

III. The Power of the Ephesian Disciples (vv. 8-10)

Similarly to Pentecost, the disciples experienced the supernatural power of God, “And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them; and they spake with tongues, and prophesied” (v. 6). When the power of the Spirit is present, an atmosphere of praise, purity, and prayer begins to form. Consequently, a passionate evangelistic fervor resonates from the church.

First, there is an *aggressive* evangelism. When the Spirit comes, witnessing for Jesus is inevitable (Acts 1:8). Our tendency sometimes is to argue what evangelism is. However, when the Spirit comes we will be doing evangelism! The church becomes the communication center for the Gospel.

Also, there is effective evangelism. Luke writes, “And this continued by the space of two years; so that all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks” (v. 10). The whole area was shaken with the Gospel. Additionally, unusual events took place as the power of God moved across the terrain (vv. 11-12). Note, while the events in Acts are indeed unusual, it’s mistaken to assume the same events must be repeated.

In other words, it may be just as unusual for your Sunday school class to experience rapid growth, or for several people to be saved on any given Sunday, as it was for Paul’s handkerchiefs to heal the sick! The overarching truth must not be overlooked: when the Holy Spirit comes, we can expect unusual events to take place.

Thus, one of the missing notes in the church today is Holy Spirit power. No wonder our evangelism is slack, our baptisms are down, and our witness is so weak. The church simply cannot move along apart from the Holy Spirit’s presence.

IV. The Purpose of the Ephesian Disciples (vv. 11-41)

Paul’s longest pastorate was at Ephesus, doubling the time he’d spent at Corinth (20:31). In Paul’s mind, Ephesus stood as a door wide open for which God Himself was responsible (cp. Rev. 3:7-8). A good question for us to ponder is this: what doors is God opening for you? The church must take advantage of every door of opportunity the Holy Spirit opens and walk through by faith. As we examine these verses together, let’s note Paul’s *opportunity*, the *obstacles* he faced, and what means he used in *overcoming*.

First, let’s consider Paul’s *opportunity*. When he wrote to the church in Corinth, he spoke of his experience in Ephesus, “For a great door and effectual is opened



unto me, and there are many adversaries" (1 Cor. 16:8-9). He referred to Ephesus as "a great door" which God opened. Ephesus was a metropolis, a seaport city that possessed political significance. It was also a wicked city, which Paul wanted to win over to the Gospel.

Observe: the darker the city, the greater the opportunity for the Gospel to display the magnificent power of the Almighty. Unless the church is willing to catch a vision of winning the city where it is located, evangelism will never take root and Christ will never be honored.

Undoubtedly Ephesus was a challenge but Paul was not alone. The former disciples of John became the fiery disciples of Jesus (v. 7). These men were filled with the Spirit and therefore were a powerful force to reach the metropolis with the Gospel message. There is no limit to what God can do with people dedicated to His service, and filled with His Spirit.

While Paul lacked no opportunity to preach the Gospel, obstacles were nevertheless evident. One obstacle was government-sponsored harassment, which nearly cost Paul his life. He wrote to Corinth concerning their mistaken notions about the resurrection, "If after the manner of men I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantageth it me, if the dead rise not? let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we die" (1 Cor. 15:32). In fact, there were "many adversaries" in Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:9).

Not only was harassment an obstacle, but so was inadequate religion (vv. 8-9). The Jewish synagogue had become a barren religious institution, spiritually bankrupt as a resource in leading people to God. Furthermore, not only was religion *inadequate*, it was also *inauthentic* (vv. 13-19). Cheap imitations existed which posed obstacles to the preaching of the true Gospel. While some knew about Jesus, they did not know Jesus. The sons of Sceva found this out the hard way (v. 14).

In addition, the *idolatrous* nature of religion stood in the way of the Gospel (vv. 24-28). The Temple of Diana was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Existing as a religious haven, it housed the treasuries of kings and the priceless artifacts of antiquity. It also served as a sanctuary for criminals. Its influence was great and had a grip on the massive population of Ephesus. Today people may not travel to Ephesus, or pay respects to the Temple of Diana; nevertheless the idolatry remains, through materialism, secularism, and humanism.

The idolatrous nature of religion stood in the way of the Gospel.

Because the Holy Spirit's power anointed Paul and his missionary team, they were able to *overcome* the obstacles. Recall Paul's words, "For a great door and effectual is opened unto me..." (1 Cor. 16:9). A great door was open, and the open door was an "effectual" door. God was on the move!

Note three indications that showed Paul overcame the obstacles to the Gospel. First, the Savior was *exalted* (v. 17). Luke simply says, "fear fell on them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified." When the name of the Lord Jesus is

Reflection Connection

Do you sometimes think your church is too small to make a difference in your community for the Gospel? Compare your situation with the Apostle Paul's. He had 12 men to assist him to reach a metropolis. How many do you have? Discuss this openly with the entire group.



magnified, obstacles crumble apart. Also, because Jesus was lifted up, they had a book-burning (v. 19). Revival always brings a bonfire! Ephesus was the center of magical arts, a magnet for the occult. When people's hearts were touched by the Gospel, they gave up their magic and replaced it with faith — faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. When people meet Jesus there is an abrupt break with sin. Old things pass; new things come (2 Cor. 5:17).

Second, the Scripture was *extended* (v. 20). The word was victorious in Ephesus: "So mightily grew the word of God and prevailed." It moved forward with resistless, overpowering strength. God's Word took over and the hearts of the people were transformed.

Third, the shrine was *eliminated*. A great riot took place because of the Temple of Diana. The riot was not because religion was disturbed. Instead it was because profits were ruined. Mess with people's money and be prepared for the consequences! The Word of God changed people's lives. New purpose was given to the people of God to win the city to Christ.

Golden Greek Nugget

In verse 12 Luke records God's performance of "extraordinary miracles." The term "miracle" comes from the Greek word "*dunamis*." It occurs approximately 120 times in the New Testament, mostly translated as "power" (cp. Acts 1:8). God validated the Apostle Paul through the powerful works He performed through him.

Wrap Up

What's missing in today's church? A powerful anointing of the Holy Spirit. Without Him, there'll be no provision, and certainly no purpose. What the church needs today is not more programs or fancy new methods. Instead the church needs today what the church needed then — the presence of God's Spirit moving in their midst.

