

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

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“More”

Part IX of the Sermon Series, “Catching Up With the Spirit.”

Acts 19:1-7

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While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. ² He said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” They replied, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” ³ Then he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They answered, “Into John’s baptism.” ⁴ Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.” ⁵ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ⁶ When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied— ⁷ altogether there were about twelve of them.

There are maximizers in this world, and there are satisficers. Psychologists use these terms to contrast how people approach decision making. Some of us, the maximizers, are inclined to invest more time, energy, and emotion into ensuring we are making the best decision possible. Others of us, the satisficers, will make a decision more quickly, operating on the principle that good enough is good enough. You probably know which category you fall into, but if you aren’t sure, there are tests you can take. I’ve taken these tests. Time and time again I score on the high end of the satisficer spectrum. I mean really high end. The first time I took one of these tests, I wasn’t sure what to make of it. On the one hand, it can be said that I’m easily content. On the other hand, it



can also be said that I will settle for a less than optimal outcome far too often. I think both of these statements are true.

I'm going to go out on a limb here and say that I think Paul was a maximizer. I have no idea how long it took Paul to make decisions, but it seems to me that he was always asking for *more*:

Paul wanted more from his churches: *Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose* (Romans 1:10).

Paul wanted more from discipleship: *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect* (Romans 12:2).

He wanted more from himself: *I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified* (1 Cor 9:27).

Paul wanted more from his faith: *So if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!* (2 Cor 5:17)

And Paul Wanted more for the disciples he found in Ephesus.

“Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” he asks. The disciples are surprised by this question. “We haven’t even heard there is a Holy Spirit,” they say. Their response reminds me of the time I took my three-year-old niece to Dunkin Donuts because she wanted a bagel. Knowing she loved cream cheese and gunning for favorite aunt status, I placed the order.

“We’ll take two sides of cream cheese with that bagel,” I said magnanimously.

My niece gasped: “Two cream cheeses?” her eyes wide with wonder. “My mother doesn’t even know you can do that!”

It’s a small story, but it looms large in my memory because in that moment I saw her world break open as a new possibility emerged. One minute one bagel corresponded with one, and only one, side of cream cheese. The next minute, *boom*, **more** was possible.

Paul catches these disciples in such a moment, but the stakes are so much higher.

“We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit,” they answer him.

“Into what then were you baptized?” he asks.



“Into John’s baptism,” they respond, providing Paul with the theological opening he’s looking for. John the baptizer enacted a baptism of repentance, Paul explains. People came to John to repent of their sins and be symbolically washed clean. The point of John’s baptism was to prepare God’s people to receive the baptism Jesus would offer, a baptism that opened up so much more possibility than they had previously imagined. A baptism that mysteriously grafts us into the body of the risen Christ. A baptism that comes through and with the Holy Spirit. A fiery baptism that drives disciples into new territory. Paul’s explanation is intended to show these disciples that they have not yet arrived at their final destination. Though they believed in Jesus and had repented of their sins, they did not yet know the end goal of their faith. These Jesus followers didn’t know God wanted to involve them in **more—more** of the boundary-breaking, liberating work that was ushered in through Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.

Belief and repentance, as crucial as those postures are, weren’t the end goal of Christian faith then, just as they aren’t the end goal today. These disciples didn’t know God was calling them into an expanded life until Paul showed up. By calling them to be baptized into Christ, Paul invited them to join a new body that would behave in a new way, a body fueled by the life-giving power of God.

Yale Divinity professor Willie James Jennings summarizes the exchange in this way,

“[Paul’s] questions expose not simply gaps in their discipleship but lack of clarity of its *telos*, its end goal, and fulfillment. Clearly, John the Baptist presented a renewal movement in Israel, a calling home, a clarifying work establishing the divine claim on a beloved people with a purpose. That purpose was to trumpet a new day in Israel. Paul is of the new day, and soon these disciples of John will also be of that new day” (Belief, a Theological Commentary on the Bible, *Acts*, p. 184).

I admit I don’t truly know what that new day looks like. I still don’t know what sort of new creation, what new way of living and being is ultimately possible in this world. But the Acts of the Apostles provides powerful snapshots.

Click: see division between humans erased as God’s Spirit is poured out upon Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free alike.

Click: see God speak through all flesh, all sons and daughters.

Click: see the young receive visions of God’s new future; see the old dream God’s dreams. Even upon the enslaved, God pours out God’s Spirit, and they speak on God’s behalf.

Click: see a community where believers share everything in common and no one lacks what they need.



Click: see people healed.

Click: see people understand each other.

Click: see giant crowds stirred up into conversion or rage as disciples give powerful speeches that push back on conventionally held religious beliefs.

Click: see God's Spirit drive disciples onto desert roads and into wilderness territory to share the good news with those who have not yet heard.

Click: see God's kingdom grow under the shadow of an empire bent on denying abundant life to all people.

How is a new world possible? Firstly, this new creation is fueled by the very power of God—the power that was unleashed through Christ's resurrection. Secondly, the church bears witness to this truth in word and deed. There's a section in the Book of Order that takes my breath away every time I read it:

“The church bears witness in word and work that in Christ the new creation has begun, and that God who creates life also frees those in bondage, forgives sin, reconciles brokenness, makes all things new, and is still at work in the world. To be members of the body of Christ is to be sent out to pursue the mission of God and to participate in God's new creation, God's kingdom drawing the present into itself” (F-1.0302d).

Click: Picture God's kingdom drawing the present into itself as people are set free from bondage, forgiven, reconciled, and communities are made whole. This is the telos of our faith—the end goal. The whole world drawn into God's kingdom through the life-giving power unleashed by the Resurrected One.

I want more involvement with God's Holy Spirit because, while I'm perfectly satisfied with my little life, I desperately want a better world for those to whom abundance has been denied. I want a better world for my children and yours. I want a church anchored on the shore of God's new day. I want to know more about how we get there.

As I've pondered this passage, I've noticed at least two key points embedded in Paul's question as to whether the disciples received the Holy Spirit when they became believers. The first is that he is speaking to *believers*. These disciples don't need convincing that Jesus has risen from the dead. They don't represent a community to convert—they represent the already converted. They are you and me and everyone else who has already said yes to the impossible claim that God came to



live among humans and lives among us still. Paul's question seems to me to be as much for **us** as it was for the believers at Ephesus. "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?"

This question leads to the second point that interests me—Paul's use of the word receive: *elabete* from the Greek root *labano*. *Elabete* connotes an active reception rather than a passive one. *Elabete* requires actively taking hold of something. This is acceptance that involves initiative on the part of the receiver.

As you follow Christ into God's new day, have you grabbed ahold of the resource that will get you there, I hear Paul asking these disciples. They tell him they've never even heard of the Holy Spirit. But we have. We know the **more**. Acts shows us what it looks like when disciples follow God's Spirit into the world. Acts show us how God wants to involve us in liberative and restorative work. These stories may very well be aspirational, but they point us toward the realization of a new day.

The communal life described in Acts wasn't perfect. Disciples disagreed. Some, like Ananias and Sapphira, died for their lies. Apostles like Paul were imprisoned—or like Stephen, even stoned to death. To think the early church knew how to bring down divisive barriers and disentangle themselves from oppressive ways **any more than we** do would be a mistake.

But they knew where to begin—by changing their end goal. Repentance and belief get us to the threshold—our reception of God's Spirit will carry us into the new day where

Liberated people will liberate others and
Forgiven people will forgive those who have trespassed against them.
Young and old, restored and made whole by the outpouring of God's Spirit, will seek
the wholeness of others,
and all the while, God's Spirit will be walking ahead of us, clearing the path, calling us
to join in the work of remaking the world according to God's good purposes.

What strikes me most throughout the book of Acts is how unafraid Christ's disciples seem to be. They are not afraid to change their minds. They are not afraid to try something new. They are not afraid to dream and hope and work for a better day. They are not afraid because they are convinced that Jesus is among them and that a new creation is unfolding.

May we not stop short of the **more** God invites us into. Through Christ's resurrection, God's Spirit was unleashed from the one human body in which it fully dwelt into all human bodies willing to receive it. May we not stop short of receiving the gift of our baptism so we can join God in making the world new as God's kingdom draws the present into itself.

