

1st Century Van Winkles

Acts 19:1-7

Introduction

In 1820, a lawyer by the name of Washington Irving published his first short story. It became so immensely popular that for the next 170 years, it would be read by millions of people.

Irving's story was so popular that most of you know the name of the leading character. He was a man who walked into the woods one day with his favorite dog and his favorite rifle; a man who met some strange men deep in the forest who offered him some strange tasting ale; a man who eventually lay down and, under the influence of that magical brew, fell into a deep sleep that would last for twenty years. His name was Rip Van Winkle.

When Rip Van Winkle awakened, he hurried back into town, only to discover that everything had changed. He went back to the tavern where he used to sit and talk with his friends underneath the inn sign that had a painting of His Majesty King George III. Now the sign had a different portrait – a portrait of a man named George Washington. And, Van Winkle's friend, the tavern keeper, was gone.

Let me read Washington Irving's own words:

In the place of his friend was a lean looking fellow, with his pockets full of handbills – haranguing vehemently about rights of citizens, elections, members of congress, liberty, Bunker's Hill – and other words, which were a perfect Babylonish jargon to the bewildered Van Winkle.

The appearance of Rip, with his long grizzled beard, his rusty rifle, his uncouth dress, and an army of women and children at his heels, soon attracted the attention of the tavern politicians. They crowded around him, eyeing him from head to foot with great curiosity. [One man] bustled up to him, and drawing him partly aside, inquired, "On which side did you vote?"

Another short, busy little fellow pulled him by the arm, and rising on tiptoe, inquired in his ear, "Are you a Federal or a Democrat?"

Eventually they all demanded who he was and what was his name?

"God knows," exclaimed [Rip], at his wit's end, "I'm not myself – I'm somebody else – I was myself last night, but I fell asleep on the mountain . . . and [now] everything's changed."

During one long twenty-year nap, the world of Rip Van Winkle had changed; and he had an incredible amount of catching up to do.

It has been a little more than twenty years since Jesus Christ rose from the dead, crushing the head of the serpent. It has been a little more than twenty years since the creation of the New Testament church at Pentecost. The world has changed dramatically.

Yet, there were people who were unaware; who did not know all the changes. Like first century Van Winkles, they had not learned of the vast changes in their world. One night they went to bed under the law, bound to Judaism, governed by the prophets. The next morning they awakened, unaware that the New Covenant had replaced the Old Covenant; that the church had replaced the synagogue; that Christ had replaced Moses; that a new race of priests had been established among both Jew and Gentile.

The Ephesian Ministry Developed

Acts, chapter 19, introduces us to a group of people who were about to awaken from a long sleep. A group of men were still following the teachings of John the Baptist, the last Old Testament Prophet. These people were in need of three things. Let me give them to you.

They needed a new revelation

1. The first of their three needs was a new revelation.

Look at Acts, chapter 19, verses 1 and 2.

It happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the upper country and came to Ephesus, and found some disciples. 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."

I can just imagine these men, at this moment, feeling a lot like Rip Van Winkle must have felt. They are confronted with the news of the Holy Spirit, and they did not have a clue. They needed the new revelation of Christ and the fact that the Holy Spirit had already come.

They needed a new relationship

2. Secondly, they needed a new relationship.

Continue to verses 3 and 4.

And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" And they said, "Into John's baptism." 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."

The last two words represented the true deficiency among these men. Their knowledge of Christ was deficient.

When Paul discovered that these men did not know anything about the Holy Spirit, he did not proceed to give them a theological lesson in Pneumatology, the study of the Holy Spirit. Instead, he gave a lesson in Christology, the person and work of Jesus Christ, and what it means to be in Jesus Christ.

Some people fly the symbol of the dove. They, in fact, are pursuing the ministry, gifts, and miracles of the Holy Spirit in an effort that, in effect, magnifies and glorifies the Holy Spirit. They forget what Christ Himself said of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. In John, chapter 16, verses 13 and 14, He told His disciples,

. . . when the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak . . . He shall glorify Me .

..

Beware of ministries and ministers that focus their prayers and attention on the Holy Spirit almost exclusively; that call for the Holy Spirit as an end to Himself; who tarry for the Spirit and plead for the Spirit; who seem to pray only to the Spirit. The Holy Spirit does not desire the spotlight of worship. He, though equally divine with the Son and Father, has as His function to the Trinity and within the Trinity, the lifting up of the Son.

Now the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life, is incredibly significant. In fact, without the Holy Spirit's indwelling, the believer

would not be able to take one step forward in growth, ministry, prayer, or maturity.

For now, however, these men listened to the new revelation of Christ, and they evidently believed, entering a new relationship with Christ.

They needed a new rite

3. Thirdly, they needed a new rite.

Look at verse 5 of Acts, chapter 19.

When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

The baptism of John was perfectly acceptable until they learned more about the work of Jesus Christ and the disciple's baptism that identifies a believer with Christ. They learned:

- The baptism of John looked forward to the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ; this new disciple's baptism looks back to the finished work of Christ.
- The baptism of John signified repentance; Christian baptism signifies regeneration.
- The baptism of John pointed to a promised immersion of the Spirit; Christian baptism points to a past immersion in the Spirit.

Look at verses 6 and 7.

And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking with tongues and prophesying. There were in all about twelve men.

The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit Distorted

The challenge with this is not so much in the interpretation of what happened to these men, but in the application as it relates to what is supposed to happen to us.

The third wave movement (the Neo-Pentecostal, Charismatic, Vineyard, tongues speaking community), has taken this paragraph as one of their chief proof texts of a doctrine they developed and applied to every believer. This doctrine actually distorts the ministry of the Holy Spirit and confuses the believer.

The Doctrine of Subsequence

This doctrine is called the Doctrine of Subsequence and can be defined as:

The belief that a person experiences a second blessing, outpouring, or Spirit baptism some time after conversion.

By the way, within the third wave movement, there is so much confusion over the exact nature of how this subsequent outpouring works that there is division and discord among the participants.

The Doctrine of Evidence

There is also, added to this, the Doctrine of Evidence, which can be defined as:

The belief that the true Christian will evidence his conversion at some point in his life, by means of tongues speaking or other visible, physical phenomena.

In other words, the baptism of the Holy Spirit comes some time after conversion rather than at conversion, which certainly seems to be the case here with John the Baptist's disciples.

Now, I spent a lot of time studying this with you in a previous exposition through Acts, in a series entitled "Holy Confusion". However, I need to re-iterate some thoughts at this point, in light of this final outpouring of the Holy Spirit as recorded in the book of Acts.

The interpretation of the Doctrine of Subsequence and the Doctrine of Evidence

The Doctrines of Subsequence and Evidence do three things. Let me give them to you.

Misunderstand the transitional nature of the book of Acts

1. First, they misunderstand the transitional nature of the book of Acts.

One author reminds us, "The book of Acts is not normative, it's narrative."

The book of Acts is narrative that takes us from the pages and practices of the Old Testament into the life and practices of the New Covenant. Some changes were immediate; others took decades to be established. And this book takes us on a tour behind the scenes, as the church emerges from the ashes of Judaism. In fact,

- In the Gospels, the church is predicted.
- In the book of Acts, the church is established.
- In the Epistles, the church is instructed.

The classic statement by John Wimber, sums up the confusion of the movement he created, the Vineyard Movement. This movement is a flagship movement that blends Pentecostalism with Signs and Wonders. John Wimber is a man by the way, who recently died in spite of passionate praying and fasting by church leaders for his healing – healing that he had earlier claimed was the right of any believer who had enough faith. Wimber said in an interview, "I want to do the things that I read in the book of Acts. It should be for me and any Christian. Otherwise, why would God put it there?"

This is the belief that I should be able to do what Peter and Paul did. They were apostles in this foundational, miraculous era. Would that my shadow should heal people as it passes over them as Peter's did, just because the book of Acts included it happening. Would that my handkerchief should heal people as Paul's did in the book of Acts. This is as foolish for me to claim as it would have been for an Israelite to claim his own ability to part the Red Sea because his leader Moses did or to call down fire from heaven because the prophet Elijah did.

Chuck Swindoll writes:

Acts is a book about decades of transition. New ways of worshiping, new teaching, new attitudes toward outsiders – these were the kinds of changes Christ was instituting through the new covenant. Acts, therefore, represents a state of flux. So we must be careful about getting our doctrinal foundations from this book because we may be trying to set in cement something that God hasn't fully formed yet. More significantly, this brief episode in Acts 19 is never mentioned again in the rest of Scriptures; Paul never uses it to establish a norm or standard of practice for the church.¹

Ignore the testimony of other scripture

2. Secondly, these doctrines ignore the testimony of other scripture.

To pull from this paragraph in Acts the sequence of events for all believers of the New Testament era, creates great confusion. All you have to do is study the other three times this occurs in Acts, and you will come up with a list of events that do not even follow the same sequence or include all the same events. In fact, the reason there is so much division, even in the Charismatic or third wave movement, concerning the formula for receiving the Holy Spirit, is because Acts does not provide a standard formula. For instance:

- Do you need the laying on of hands? Yes, according to Acts, chapter 19, but not according to Acts, chapter 10.
- Do new converts speak in tongues? They did in Acts, chapters 10 and 19, but not in chapter 8.
- Do new converts prophesy as well? In Acts, chapter 19, they did, but not in chapters 8 or 10.

The reason for so much confusion over the model, is because the book of Acts does not provide a model. These were unique experiences during the transitional period of the establishment of the church.

The Epistles teach

What do the letters to the church, or the epistles, teach? The epistles teach, consistently, the same sequence of events related to salvation and Spirit baptism.

There is saving faith alone placed in Christ alone

- First, there is saving faith alone placed in Christ alone.

Ephesians, chapter 2, verses 8 and 9, teaches,

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

There is immediate or simultaneous baptism by the Spirit into Christ

- Secondly, there is immediate or simultaneous baptism by the Spirit into Christ.

I Corinthians, chapter 12, verse 13, uses the past tense related to Spirit baptism, as Paul writes,

For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

In fact, Romans, chapter 8, verse 9b, informs us that it is impossible to even be saved without having experienced the baptism of the Spirit.

. . . But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him [God].

The baptism of the Spirit is that invisible event that occurs the moment you accept Christ. You are

baptized, immersed into the body of Christ; and the Holy Spirit takes up residency in your very body.

Paul wrote, in I Corinthians, chapter 6, verse 19a, that,

. . . your body [at the moment of salvation] is a temple of the Holy Spirit . . .

There is public immersion in water to illustrate inward immersion by the Holy Spirit into Christ

- Finally, there is public immersion in water to illustrate inward immersion by the Holy Spirit into Christ.

Romans, chapter 6, verses 3 and 4, tells us,

Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

We today, experience this New Covenant rite, the public declaration of our identification with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So in every pool or pond, believers, new and old, illustrate their immersion by the Spirit into the body of Christ.

By the way, your water baptism does not make you a Christian, it proclaims that you are a Christian; it does not put you into the family of God, it announces you are a family member already, by virtue of Spirit baptism at the moment of conversion by your faith in Christ alone.

Miss the larger connection to Pentecost

3. The Doctrines of Subsequence and Evidence not only misunderstand the transitional nature of Acts and ignore the record of other scripture, but also miss the larger connection to Pentecost.

When you study the following four instances, you discover something incredible. The early church is revealed, by means of the signs and wonders through the Spirit, as one church. God makes sure that every possible category physically evidences the miraculous presence of the invisible Spirit to undeniably teach the lesson that the Spirit has created one church.

- The first instance involved Jews (Acts 2).
- The second instance involved half Jew, half Gentile-Samaritans (Acts 8).

- The third instance involved Gentiles (Acts 10).
- This final instance that sweeps into the body of Christ, involves Old Testament saints (Acts 19).

These Rip Van Winkles who had yet to hear that they need no longer follow an Old Testament prophet, are now to follow their New Testament Savior and be indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit Defined

The ministry of the Holy Spirit is an incredibly significant ministry. If we are to wait for the Holy Spirit to come after conversion, or to tarry for Him, or to plead for Him, then all of the things I am about to mention are not possible; in fact, it would be impossible to even be a Christian without His baptism and indwelling power.

Let me overview the ministry of the Holy Spirit as defined in the New Testament epistles.

- He enables intimacy with the Father (Galatians 4:6).
- He equips believers for ministry (I Corinthians 12:12-27).
- He provides a new identity (II Corinthians 5:17).
- He anoints believers with an understanding of gospel truth (Ephesians 3:4-6).
- He transforms us into Christ-likeness (II Corinthians 3:18).
- He maintains the ministry and growth of the church (Acts 20:28; Ephesians 2:22).

What Happened in Ephesus?

So, what happened in Ephesus?

A pattern for Spirit baptism was not established, but a principle of spiritual unity was established

1. A pattern for Spirit baptism was not established, but a principle of spiritual unity was established.

All four groups mentioned in the book of Acts received the bestowal of the Holy Spirit under the direction of an apostle. All four groups were included as members of the body with equal standing. The church is without social classes. Diverse peoples, yes, but unity in spite of diversity.

The authority of spiritual leadership by Paul was revealed as equal to that of Peter

2. The authority of spiritual leadership by Paul was revealed as equal to that of Peter.

Luke, by the way, makes an obvious attempt to show Paul as equal to Peter in apostolic authority. It is important for the church to know that. For example:

- Peter's first sermon is recorded in full and so is Paul's.
- Luke shows that both men went to the Jew first and then to the Gentile.
- Luke tells that both men were imprisoned and miraculously released.
- Both were visited by an angel.
- Luke records some of Peter's miracles and some of Paul's as well.
- Peter is shown to heal people by means of his shadow and Paul by means of his handkerchief.
- Luke records that Peter raised Dorcas from the dead and also that Paul raised Eutychus from the dead.
- At Peter's hands, the Holy Spirit came upon the Gentiles and at Paul's hands, the Holy Spirit came upon the Old Testament saints.

The spotlight is swinging from Peter toward Paul now. Paul and his instruction to the New Testament church takes center stage. Notice Acts, chapter 19, verse 8.

And he [Paul] entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God.

A Closing Question

Let me close by asking a question of you.

If there is not today, some supernatural, miraculous demonstration manifested by the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and if we are indeed baptized by the Spirit at the moment of conversion rather than later, and if signs and wonders were used in this foundational stage of the apostolic community, which we are now building upon that foundation, then what is the demonstration by the believer today that reveals he has indeed been baptized by the Spirit into the body of Christ? Is there a physical demonstration of the Spirit's power in our lives? *Yes!*

Turn to Galatians, chapter 5, and look at verses 16 through 21.

But I say, walk by [means of the power of] the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.

For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.

Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality,

idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions,

envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.

The key word in these verses is the word “practice,” which is a present active participle. It refers to a man or woman who lives this kind of lifestyle without any remorse or guilt; without any thought of repenting or changing. It is a person who may say, “Yea, I’ve asked Jesus into my heart, but I’m going to live like I want to live.”

This paragraph tells you that, if that is your attitude, you have been deceived; you do not belong to Christ at all; the Spirit of God does not indwell you. For, if He did, you could not continue to practice such things without guilt and remorse; you could not continue to have any sense of assurance that you are headed for the kingdom. Instead, you have every reason to believe you are headed for hell and judgment.

John Calvin summed it up well when he wrote, “You are saved by faith alone, but saving faith is never alone.”

Saving faith is repulsed by the deeds of the flesh. Any failure of the true believer in these listed activities brings about guilt and remorse, as well as a desire for forgiveness and restored fellowship with the Spirit, who has been grieved.

Now notice the life of a person who is indwelt by the Spirit; a person who is growing and is in submission to the Spirit. Verses 22 and 23 of

Galatians, chapter 5, give the physical manifestation of the Spirit’s power.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

These are the miraculous demonstration of the Spirit’s control over your life. In other words, you cannot have them without the Holy Spirit in your life!

This is the new truth, delivered by the apostle Paul to the early church and to us. Life is now different for those of us who have awakened from the intoxicating slumber of sin; who have discovered a new world, a new path, a new plan, and a new freedom in the person of Jesus Christ.

Washington Irving illustrated it well as he closed his story:

Rip Van Winkle found many of his former cronies, though all rather the worse for the wear and tear of time; he preferred making friends among the rising generation, with whom he soon grew into great favor . . . He took his place once more on the bench at the inn door, and was revered as one of the patriarchs of the village, and a chronicle of the old times “before the war.”

It was some time before he could be made to comprehend the strange events that had taken place during his sleep. How that there had been a revolutionary war – that the country had thrown off the yoke of old England – and that, instead of being a subject of His Majesty George the Third, he was now a free citizen of the United States [of America].

What a great illustration of the believer who was once enslaved in trespasses and sins, but is now free in Christ by means of the Holy Spirit.

ⁱ Chuck Swindoll, Acts, Vol. II, p. 20.