

“Sacrament, Magic, and the Word”
Acts 19:1-20
September 14, 2008

INTRODUCTION:

This passage is filled with things that are a bit of an embarrassment to many modern readers. It seems so unscientific and unsophisticated to believe in things like miracles, demon-possession, magic and speaking in tongues. But all of these are mentioned in these verses, and the Bible views all of them as belonging to the real world, not the world of fiction. Miracles, demon-possession, magic and tongues-speaking, as they are presented in this passage, have something in common. There is a connection in all of them between the physical world and spiritual realities. For example, it is only when these twelve disciples of John are baptized in the name of Jesus—a physical action that uses words—that the Holy Spirit comes upon them. The miracles Paul is said to have performed utilized physical things like his handkerchiefs and aprons. Demons are cast out by the speaking of words, employing the name and authority of Jesus. Even the practice of magic arts, which is condemned in the Bible, is just a corruption of this connection that God has built between the physical and spiritual worlds.

Let me try to help by saying this differently. God brings his blessings into this world by a combination of spiritual and physical means. He does use the promises of his word. But he also chooses to use such physical signs as the sacraments of the church. That’s the message that comes through during Paul’s three-year stay in Ephesus. This was the longest he stayed anywhere during his missionary travels. It would be the last stability he would experience in the book of Acts, and probably in his life. After this, his life would be dominated by, in the words of one commentator, “troubles, travels and trials.” Paul shows us here how a long-term ministry should be focused. In short, it should utilize the connections God has established between the physical and spiritual worlds, but should focus its main efforts on the ministry of the word. Let’s look at this now under the following three points.

I. Sacrament – God’s Choice of Using the Physical (v. 1-7)

The early verses of this chapter record a meeting between Paul and 12 disciples of John the Baptist. Though John had been dead for quite some time by now, his disciples were numerous and had spread throughout the world. They had received his baptism of repentance, which was preparatory to faith in Jesus. But it seems that these twelve were stuck in the past, because they had never received Christian baptism, that is, baptism in the name of Jesus. After Paul declares to them the good news of Jesus, they receive this baptism, the Holy Spirit comes upon them, and they speak in tongues.

Before we talk about God's use of the sacrament of baptism, there are two questions that we need to clear up. First, does this passage teach a second blessing view of the Christian life, with that second blessing being the baptism of the Holy Spirit? This is the view taught by Pentecostals and Charismatics. It says that God's great first blessing is to give us salvation in Christ. But then he offers a second blessing for those who will more fully submit to him and ask for this gift. He will give the Holy Spirit, and that second blessing is always marked by the gift of tongues. The conclusion, then, is that if you have never spoken in tongues, you are missing much of the blessing God has for you. I don't believe the Bible teaches, either here or elsewhere, a second blessing view such as this. In this passage, I think Luke is telling us that these 12 were not believers in Jesus at all. They were John the Baptist's disciples, not Jesus' disciples. They had been prepared for Jesus, but had not yet had the gospel of Jesus declared to them. That's what Paul does in verse 4, reminding them that it was John the Baptist who had pointed out the need to believe in Jesus. They did so here, were baptized into his name and received the Holy Spirit. The Bible is consistent throughout in teaching that all who believe in Jesus have been given the Holy Spirit. So he tells the Corinthians, **"For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit"** (1 Cor. 12:13).

The second question is whether we should expect all those who have believed in Jesus to speak in tongues. There are three times in the book of Acts when people are said to receive the Holy Spirit and then speak in tongues. Pentecost was the first of those. The Samaritans in Acts 8 is the second occasion, and this passage contains the third. Note that it says here that their speaking in tongues wasn't directly preceded by baptism, but by the laying on of apostolic hands by Paul. It was the same in Acts 8, where Peter and John laid their hands on the Samaritans, after which the Holy Spirit came on them and they spoke in tongues. In other words, what we have here is a mini-Pentecost. In the vast majority of cases in Acts, speaking in tongues does not follow faith in Jesus and baptism. My understanding on tongues-speaking is somewhere between those who claim that it is normal for everyone who has believed and those who say that this gift only appeared in apostolic times and has now ceased. I don't see the biblical evidence for either of these claims, so I don't disbelieve those who tell me they have experienced speaking in tongues, though I have never had that experience myself.

Let's return now to the main point I want to make, that God has appointed the sacraments of the church to be physical instruments he uses to bring blessing into our lives. There are two sacraments given to us, baptism and the Lord's Supper. Paul emphasized here that John's disciples needed to be baptized in the name of Jesus, and following this they entered into the blessing of God's Spirit. Our understanding of the sacraments is that they are means of grace, physical acts which God has appointed to bring blessing into our lives. They are more than mere illustrations. I think most people view the sacraments as good illustrations of spiritual realities that Jesus endorses as abiding illustrations. They are more like the water of the Jordan River in which Naaman was told to

wash himself if he wanted to be healed of his leprosy. Of course, the water itself had no healing properties. God was the healer, but he chose to use the water from this river and not another. God chooses to use baptism and the Lord's Supper to bring about the blessings he wants to impart to us, and if we believe this, we must utilize these sacraments in faith. The need for faith brings us to our next point.

II. Magic – Man's Corruption of this Relationship (v. 11-20)

If sacraments are viewed as the permanent connection between the physical and spiritual world, we also need to acknowledge that God sometimes and temporarily establishes other connections. That seems to be the case with Paul's handkerchiefs and aprons. Commentators think that this handkerchief is something of a euphemism. It was really a sweat rag wrapped around his head, and the apron was what he used in the course of his trade as a tentmaker. Those items were carried both to the sick and the demon-possessed (note that Luke knew that a distinction needed to be made between these two), so that by the merest contact with them healing and the casting out of the demons took place.

The rest of this passage, however, talks about the wrong use of this connection between the physical world and the spiritual through magic. The problem with magic, and the reason it is condemned in the Bible, is not that there is no connection between the physical and the spiritual, but that magic is the attempt to manipulate God, apart from faith, through physical means. Ephesus was known as a center of magic in this region. One commentator summarizes the view of magic current in Ephesus as follows:

What characterizes magic is the attempt through various sorts of rituals and words of power to manipulate some deity or supernatural power into doing the will of the supplicant. "The overriding characteristic of the practice of magic throughout the Hellenistic world was the cognizance of a spirit world exercising influence over virtually every aspect of life. The goal of the magician was to discern the helpful spirits from the harmful ones and learn the distinct operations and the relative strengths and authority of the spirits. Through this knowledge, means could be constructed (with spoken or written formulas, amulets, etc.) for the manipulation of the spirits in the interest of the individual person." (Witherington, p. 577).

Luke tells us two stories about improper magic. The first is about seven brothers who had a little business going as Jewish exorcists. Such exorcists were always looking for new formulas and divine names that would make them more effective in their work. They had heard of some remarkable effectiveness Paul was having in casting out demons by using the name of Jesus. So they gave it a try, saying to a demon, **"I adjure you by the Jesus, whom Paul proclaims"** (v. 13). It was evident to the demon that they were frauds because they had no faith relationship with the Jesus whose name they were invoking. No one who really believes in Jesus would refer to him as the one someone else believes in and

proclaims. His name would be used in a more familiar and personal way. The demon picks up on this immediately and turns the tables on them all. **“The man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded”** (v. 16).

The second story of magic describes the transformation that took place in the hearts of Jesus’ followers who had practiced magic. They saw now that it was both wrong and dangerous to attempt to manipulate God through magic, and they came forward in a public way and confessed their sin and burned their magic books. These would have been the books containing the spells used in the attempt to gain control over the gods. This wasn’t censorship, since they were burning their own books, but repentance. And it was a deep repentance, because Luke tells us that these books were quite valuable. They could have gotten rid of them in a way that would have brought gain to themselves, through selling them to others. But they were so deeply convicted of their sin that they could not consider such an act.

How should we apply this to ourselves? Should we burn our Harry Potter books? No, I don’t think that’s the point. There is nothing wrong with fantasy literature that employs magic as a picture of what God does. That’s the case with the play to which we will be treated this evening, C. S. Lewis’s *The Magician’s Nephew*. In a way, there is an appropriate magic, if we understand magic simply as God’s miracles on behalf of his people. Magic becomes evil when it is used in an attempt to manipulate God. So, we should repent of all superstition in our lives. Superstition is a type of magic. Wearing clothes you feel to be your lucky clothes, or carrying some “lucky charm” is superstitious. No Christian should do that. Forwarding an e-mail chain letter out of fear of something bad happening if you don’t is another example. A Christian should never say “Knock on wood” after reporting on something good that has happened. I found out recently that painting your front door black is supposed to bring bad luck, while painting it red brings good luck. If you’ve ever been to our house, you may remember that our front door is black. Knowing what I know now about this superstition, if I could paint it all over again, I would choose the same color as an act of defiance against this superstition. These superstitious behaviors are nothing more than unbelieving attempts to manipulate God to bring good things into our lives and keep out the bad. The main reason all superstitions are wrong is simply that for the one who is in Christ, God has already pledged himself to give us all spiritual blessings in Christ. Any bad he allows into our lives will be turned by him into good. We need not fear bad luck nor try to bring good luck because we trust God for all things. This brings us to our final point.

III. The Word – God’s Normal Means for Transformation (v. 8-10)

The reason we don’t need to try to control God to get him to bring good into our lives is that he has already promised to bring good to us in Christ. The good

news of Jesus is that we are under the favor of God through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. As important as it is to get straight this relationship between the physical world and the spiritual world so that we can think correctly about such things as the sacraments and magic, it is even more important to believe the announcement of God's favor to us in Christ. That's why, as you may have noticed, that Paul spent such a large amount of his time not in performing miracles or the sacraments, but in teaching the word of God. So Luke reports how in Ephesus **“he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God”** (v. 8). And in the very next verse, we read that Paul **“reasoned daily in the hall of Tyrannus,”** a pattern he continued for two years.

It is this declaration of God's favor that transforms both individuals and cities. We have already seen how God transformed the lives of the Christians who had been guilty of practicing magic. In the passage just after the point where we stopped, we read that the entire city of Ephesus had begun to be transformed. The tradesmen who had been profiting from the idolatry and magic of Ephesus saw a marked decrease in business, and they rightly attributed it to this new message about Jesus.

CONCLUSION:

We don't need to manipulate God, because we have his favor already. In the gospel we hear God say to us, “I love you and would rather die than live without you.” Of course, he has done just that; he has died in order that we might have life. It is as we believe this that our lives are transformed.

We are like a story I heard this week about a rose called the Peggy Martin Rose. Peggy Martin lived in New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina. She was known among those who grow roses for the many beautiful roses she had cultivated around her home. One of those was a thornless rose (which I understand is not completely thornless, but just less so) that she had found growing in her area. Katrina brought great tragedy to Peggy Martin, the greatest of which was the loss of both her parents. She also lost her own home and her roses, as a result of the fact that her house was under 20 feet of salt water for several days. But one of her roses survived, the thornless rose. The society responsible for naming roses decided to name it after her, since the rose had never been given a name prior to that. Two years ago, Ralph Anderson, one of our church members, went to photograph Peggy Martin and her rose for *Southern Living* magazine. While there, she gave him a six inch cutting from her rose that had survived Katrina. This spring, Ralph and Sally planted that rose out by the split-rail fence in front of the church, where it is now flourishing. When it gets established, it will flower twice a year, displaying its beauty for all to see. That's the way we are. We were rescued by God from the devastation of sin, including our foolish superstitions. We now know the favor of God through Jesus, and we will flower through transformed lives for the glory of God.