

Acts 19:1-22

Before I started ministerial training, I was a community worker which meant that I got to do some interesting things. One of these was being asked to be someone's birthing partner!

People asked me if I felt confident, or whether I was nervous at all. Having had three children of my own and knowing that there was a midwife on hand, meant that I just felt excited about being there.

But how confident would we be about birthing a new Christian? Would you feel like you would know what to do? Yet in a sense we should all be willing and able to do this.

1. An inadequate birthing process

Soon after Paul arrives in Ephesus, he finds 12 men, who seem in some sense to be 'Christians' (Luke calls them 'disciples' in v. 1) but in other ways not (Luke tells us that they only knew about the baptism of John (v.3)).

Like now, people moved around a bit and the Roman Empire was a big place. These men were probably Jews who at some point had had an opportunity to respond to John's message of repentance. Presumably they also knew something about the person of Jesus and his teachings.

But something prompted Paul to investigate what they did believe a bit further. Paul asks them if they received the Holy Spirit when they believed? 'No' they say. Well that was a bit strange!

If they were Jewish, they probably knew about the Holy Spirit, how the Holy Spirit had been given to various individuals from time to time, people like King David, or Saul, or one of the prophets. But perhaps what they meant by this was that they hadn't heard the end of the Christian story – they knew nothing about how the Holy Spirit had been poured out on all believers on the day of Pentecost. They had no idea that the Holy Spirit was available to all believers!

In his book the 'Normal Christian Birth' David Pawson argues that normally repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ are swiftly followed by baptism in water and Spirit baptism. But from time to time, the birthing process is not so straight forward. We find examples of this in Acts 8 and 10 (where Spirit baptism, water baptism) where there is a delay, or things happen in a different order.

I don't know about you, over the course of my life I've met many people who call themselves Christians and yet to me seem to have missed something vital about what it really means for Jesus to be Lord of their life. I would argue that something has gone wrong in their spiritual birthing process.

My friend J. went to church, had been baptised as an infant, and described himself as a Christian, yet I detected something missing. It wasn't Jon's fault, no one in the church had ever explained what faith in Jesus really entailed a life of ongoing discipleship and that the Holy Spirit was available empower the believer to live a transformed life which is being redeemed.

My friend Jon was a bit like the 'believers' that Paul found.

The baptism they had received (the baptism of John), was merely a preparatory rite by which people pledged themselves to repentance, in expectation of the coming Messiah. But the Messiah had now come; forgiveness and a new life was now possible. Fortunately, Paul was on hand to explain this to them and they readily accepted what he had to say. They are immediately baptised into the name of Jesus and Paul finishes the birthing process by laying hands on them so that they might receive the Holy Spirit.

In the New Testament, there seems to be a clear expectation that when the Holy Spirit comes upon someone there is some sort of outward sign of the Spirit's presence, in this case the men start speaking in tongues and prophesying.

It's my belief that there are many people in our communities and even on the fringes of our churches, who have never been properly birthed as Christians. Are we able to help bring that process to fruition? Think about the people you know? Is there someone who needs to have the 'way of God explained more adequately' (see for example, Apollos in Acts 18:26). It's a privilege and a joy to see people fully born again.

You might even feel like this is you! You believe, but someone along the line you feel that you never quite received all that God intended for you. You feel like your trying to live the Christian life without that life changing encounter with the risen Christ and the Spirit's empowering. If that's the case I would encourage you to speak to someone in your church (or me), who can help you.

2. Signs and miracles AND opposition

These twelve men were only the first converts, however. More were to come. Paul spent 3 years in Ephesus years preaching the gospel. It was a smart move in terms of its location because it lay on an

important trade route between Asia (East) and the West. It was a city state (regional capital) which has its own elected magistrates and degree of autonomy. It could even set its own taxes - so it was a wealthy city! But it was also a place of spiritual darkness.

Having endured many years of war, the Roman Empire had brought peace to the area and so the people of Ephesus were extremely loyal to the Roman Emperor. The Emperor Cult (where the Emperor was worshipped as a god), was very important as was the Cult of Artemis (their local goddess). Her temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Here in Ephesus the Hellenism of the Greeks, met the mystery religions of the East. The city was superstitious and into magic in a big way!

The book of Acts doesn't tell us that much about Paul's time in Ephesus, but a careful reading of 1 & 2 Corinthians suggests that his stay was not entirely straight forward, (Paul may even have been imprisoned for a lengthy stretch in Ephesus).

During his time in Ephesus Paul supported himself by working as a tent maker.

For the first three months, he spoke regularly in the synagogue teaching about Jesus and the Kingdom of God. Inevitably however opposition sets in and Paul moves next door to the lecture Theatre Tyrannus. (Some translations add the detail that he hired it from 11:00 AM and 4:00 PM the time when most people were resting from work. But not Paul! For two years Paul spent most afternoons proclaiming the gospel to the Ephesians.

His message was backed up by signs and wonders. Even Luke (who must have seen his fair share of signs and wonders), remarked that the miracles that took place in Ephesus were extraordinary (v.11). Of course it was God how worked these miracles, but the superstitious Ephesians equated them with Paul and went so far as to take his old work clothes, rags and aprons from his workshop in the belief that these objects would heal the sick or cast out an evil spirits. And it worked! Why? What is God up to? It seems a strange way for God to work to me! But we have to remember that Ephesus was a city preoccupied with magic which in a strange way also proved to be an opening for the gospel. Perhaps God had to prove that he was more powerful than all their superstitious magic and spells. God was working in a way which the Ephesians would understand – at least to pique their interest in the first place. A miracles per se, might not lead to faith, but might help someone take a first step on the road to belief. God meets the Ephesians where they are 'at' but they encounter a power they like they had never known before.

The city was a religious melting pot which draw people from far and wide, and we get to hear about one particular encounter which had a significant impact on both the Christians and the non-Christian Jews and Gentiles living in Ephesus.

Some professional Jewish exorcists, the 'Sons of Sceva' where in town. They had obviously seen or heard something of Paul and his ministry and thinking that they have come across an even more powerful incantation, they attempt to perform an exorcism by adding the 'Name of the Lord Jesus' to their repertoire. They get a nasty shock when the demons turn on them: "Jesus I know, Paul I know about but who are you?" The demon turns on them and drives them out of the house naked and bleeding.

Anyone can use the name of Jesus - but it's only with faith and prayer that real power can be found. Paul was the real deal. News about this soon gets out, and the Greeks and Jews are all seized with fear. The result of this is that Jesus' name is held in high honour, so much so that those who are breaking free from their superstitious past and their obsession with magic, openly confess their evil deeds and burn their magic scrolls (which are worth a small fortune). This is a powerful sign that their new life in Christ has dispelled their old life. Not surprisingly the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power. Despite this we read that this led to much opposition for Paul, and eventually a riot..

The Kingdom of God may come with power, but it will also come with opposition.

I find this passage encourages me, that no matter what circumstances we may find ourselves in, even one's of enormous spiritual opposition, God is able to work powerfully in the situation to bring spiritual light and life. However, it also reminds me that God is all powerful and not to be trifled with. Do we have an appropriate fear of God? If we take God's power seriously, are there aspects of our life that require our deep and sincere repentance?

Why don't we take a few quiet minutes to ask God if there is anything that we need to repent of and/or anyone in our circle of friends and neighbours who needs us to explain the way of God more fully.