

THE CRITICAL QUESTION

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Paul 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.” Then he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” (Acts 19:2-3)

St. Paul’s question to some believers in Ephesus is ruthlessly applicable to our day. “*Into what then were you baptized?*” he asked. Just when we had turned the page on 2020, daring to hope that 2021 would be off to a good start, the horrific images of Wednesday’s chaos in Washington DC began filling our screens. As we all well know, an armed and angry mob stormed the US Capitol building and occupied the most sacred civic space in our nation for several hours in the effort to prevent legislators from certifying the results of the November election. It was the first serious breach of the Capitol since 1814, when British troops, then the world’s most powerful military, invaded and burned the space. Wednesday’s insurrectionists were hardly a disciplined military force. Most shocking of all, it was the rhetoric of the sitting President of the United States who incited them at a rally near the White House to go do what they did.

When order was finally restored five people had died, three of whom as a direct result of the violence at the Capitol. Five people dead – and for what? One was a member of the Capitol police force protecting the place. The other two were amongst the vandals who were storming it. One of the deceased criminal trespassers was crushed in the stampede, the other was shot in the chest while climbing through a smashed-out window in a door between the mob and members of Congress.

To all the insurrectionists we might ask St. Paul’s question: *Into what then were you baptized?* The woman who was shot to death left behind clear answers on her social media accounts. She was baptized in the waters of anger and resentment. She was baptized into conspiracy theories about a stolen election, even after every state in the union had verified their results. Wednesday was supposed to be the day when she and her cohorts would turn the tide. On Tuesday she wrote on Twitter: “Nothing will stop us. They can try and try and try, but the storm is here and it is descending on DC in less than 24 ours. Dark to light!” Was she right? No, sadly for her the spirit she followed led her astray and betrayed her in the worst possible way. It was not dark to light, but merely lights out.

“Into what then were you baptized?” It is a critical question for all of us. In today’s reading from the Acts of the Apostles (19:1-7) we heard Paul ask it of some disciples he came across on his missionary journeys in the city of Ephesus. At first Paul assumed that the twelve believers were followers of Jesus, but such was not the case. They were, in fact, continuing disciples of John the Baptist. Either they had not heard or did not accept that Jesus of Nazareth was the one whom John himself identified as God’s promised Messiah. A curious bit of history that we can see evidence of in the New Testament is that John’s disciples did not immediately change their allegiance when Jesus appeared on the banks of the Jordan River. John had been baptizing for a long time, and some of his converts had dispersed throughout the Mediterranean, even further out than Ephesus. The challenges of geography and communication alone undoubtedly froze their spiritual development and sustained their loyalty to John.

In any case, when Paul encountered “the Ephesian Twelve” – as we might call them – he noticed immediately that something was amiss. We don’t know exactly what the problem was,

but the text of Acts implies that it was a lack – a lack of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps Paul could detect no signs in them of the Spirit’s fruits: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Perhaps Paul noticed that the practice of their faith was all duty and no delight, all burden and no blessing. Paul was never one to mince words, and he was audacious enough to call them out on their deficiency. He asked 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.*”

To be sure, the reply of the Ephesian Twelve was a bit suspect, because John the Baptist had talked plenty about the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, Paul pressed on and asked the critical question: *Into what then were you baptized?* When he learned that they were still loyal to the ways of John – that their growth in faith had stopped at the preaching of John – he told them about Jesus in such a way that *they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus*. Whether or not Paul physically re-baptized them with water is unclear, but when he laid his hands on them and prayed the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they received the Spirit’s gifts. What is more, Paul stayed with this group for over two years, teaching them to walk in love as Christ loved us. *For once you were darkness, he would later write to them, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light (Ephesians 5:8).*

What was the matter with John’s baptism? If you read between the lines of today’s passage from Acts, it’s possible to conclude that the Ephesian Twelve asked the very same question of Paul: What’s the matter with John’s baptism? In reply Paul would have said that absolutely nothing was wrong with it. At the time it was an essential first step. As we heard in today’s reading from the Gospel of Mark 1:4-11), John himself meant it to be in preparation of what was to come next. To suggest a metaphor here, if we were to compare baptism with the Coronavirus vaccine, John’s baptism was the first dose, but lacked the booster shot. Specifically, Paul said that *John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.*

You see, baptism includes both turning away from our sins and turning toward Jesus. We renounce the evil powers of this world, and we promise to follow and obey Jesus as our Lord. Christian baptism today incorporates both elements of turning away and turning toward: one shot and you’re good to go. But with John in the River Jordan, it was only a baptism of repentance. As such it was incomplete. It lacked the Spirit that came through Jesus. And here’s the thing: only by the power of the Spirit working in us can we finally and forever turn away from the forces of wickedness that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God.

When I was first out of seminary and newly ordained I served as the curate of a large church in Michigan. Of course, as the curate my responsibilities included youth ministry. Thus I spent long hours watching high school sports and musicals that featured members of the church youth group. The sports were fine, but I really had to put on the game face for the musicals. Honestly, never again for as long as I live do I need to see another rendition of *Guys and Dolls* or *South Pacific*. One particular earworm of a song from *South Pacific* is called “I’m Gonna Wash that Man Right Outa My Hair.” Nellie the navy nurse decides that she needs to renounce her budding romance with Emile, so she sings the song while washing her hair. Alas, the going is rough, and after numerous scenes of people spontaneously bursting into song and dance, Nellie is powerless to break free and surrenders to Emile.

In the musical, Emile is a good man and Nellie ultimately is blessed because of her inability to wash him out of her hair. The things we renounce in baptism are of a different sort. The toxic voices bring darkness, not light. Shutting them down is one thing, but driving them out of our heads is another. Even if we succeed, nature abhors a vacuum and we need to take care about what comes after them. In the Gospel of Matthew (12:43-45) Jesus talked about a man who washed a demon right out of his soul, but left his house empty. What happened? The demon returned with

seven other spirits more evil than himself. Merely turning away was insufficient. Welcoming the Spirit of the living God, which is the Spirit of Christ, is the essential next step. It is what John talked about on the banks of the Jordan, and what Paul administered to the Ephesian Twelve. For them it truly was dark to light.

So it is that we return to the critical question for you and me: *Into what then were you baptized?* Or in Paul's other words, *Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?* I realize that I am edging here into creepy territory for respectable Episcopalians. We fancy ourselves to be "God's frozen chosen" who don't get carried away by the spirit of any age. Some of us might even go so far as to say, "We've not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." But really, ask yourself: do you enjoy what you might call a close, even personal relationship with the living God?

A story is told of a young mother during World War Two, tucking her little girl into bed. On the nightstand was a photo of the woman's husband, the child's father who was a soldier, far away fighting the war. The nightly ritual would include prayers for the father's safe return, then the mother would bid the child to "kiss Daddy goodnight." The girl would reach for the photo and kiss the image of her father. Finally the great day came when the father returned and the family was reunited. On his first night home, when he himself was there for the bedtime ritual, the girl's mother said, "Now you may kiss Daddy goodnight." Do you know what the girl did? She reached for the photo and kissed it.

Sometimes I fear that I am flirting with an image of God rather than the Spirit of the true and living God – who has come, who is here. We are baptized in our ways. We are creatures of habit. We all live inside our protective bubbles. We listen to the voices in our own echo chambers: family, politics, and social media. Then we are delighted when they confirm that God seems to be in agreement with pretty much everything we think. Thankfully, most of the time we can see these counterfeit gods for what they are and they gain no traction in our lives. Nevertheless, beware. That which appears benign can grow malignant and deal death not life, darkness not light. Have you received the Holy Spirit? How can you tell if you have or haven't? Perhaps the measuring rod can be the fruit of the Spirit, the very things Paul found lacking in the Ephesian Twelve: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. If you struggle with these things, know that it is not by our own strength that we accomplish them. If you have been baptized (and if you haven't, let's talk about that), you can trust that Spirit of God is right by your side, and even dwells within you to work that which is well pleasing in God's sight.

God invites us to summon the help of the indwelling Spirit, who strengthens us to do more than our natural selves are capable of doing. I've read how Martin Luther, the 16th century German theologian and reformer would avail himself of the Spirit's help. When he became downhearted, tempted, or overly pessimistic, when he felt himself ready to lash out at any of his many enemies, the great Martin Luther would take a piece of chalk and write in large letters on his desk, I HAVE BEEN BAPTIZED. By so doing he reminded himself that God's Spirit was right beside him, dwelt within him, and was a very present help in time of trouble. He remembered that God had high hopes for him, that he had promised to follow Jesus Christ, and that he belonged to the Christian family in which we are all brothers and sisters. I HAVE BEEN BAPTIZED, scrawled across his desk. I suppose the modern equivalent might be making the words the screen saver on your phone, or even your ringtone. Believe me: I've heard stranger things go off in people's pockets.

Into what then were you baptized? For those of us who want to walk as children of light, this is the critical question to ask every day.