

People of the Spirit: God Breathes the Jesus Movement into Samaria and Ephesus

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This is a two-session workshop that will give you a taste of Manuscript Bible Study as we look briefly at two small selections from the Book of Acts. The selections, from chapters 8 and 18-19, show how the new Jesus Movement began to work in Samaria and Ephesus. Luke's text (in the NRSV translation) is provided digitally in a special format to enhance our study. As we look at the way Luke describes what happened in those early days, we will also be on the lookout for lessons that can help us respond faithfully to God's mission call in the time of COVID-19.

“Manuscript Bible Study” is a form of inductive Bible study. This means that it seeks to discover the meaning of Scripture through the classic disciplines of observation, interpretation and application (or, incarnation):

Observation:	What does the text say?
Interpretation:	What did that mean to its first hearers and readers?
Application:	What does the text mean to us today?

The word “manuscript” in the name of this approach comes from the use of a specially-formatted version of a standard translation. The format strips away distractions, provides plenty of “white space” for jotting notes and is printed on only one side of each sheet of paper, so that we can see entire sections of material at a single glance. All of these features are dedicated to helping us have a fresh encounter with the text and see things we might otherwise miss. (*Note: **usually**, the special-format text has only page and line numbers, not chapter and verse numbers. Since chapters and verses were no part of the original manuscripts of the Bible, they are not reliable indicators of where major or minor changes of focus, thought or argument occur. We tend to forget that, and to give them too much influence on our reading. **However**, because we have so little time together, and because it typically takes a while to get used to locating things by page-&-line, for this workshop our study text contains chapter-&-verse indicators. To lessen their impact on our reading, they have been reduced to superscript-sized numerals. During our conversations, we will make use of both page-&-line and chapter-&-verse locators, to help everyone stick together.*)

I was introduced to Manuscript Bible Study as a college student in the early 1970s, and found it life-changing. I then pursued it with the founder, Paul Byer, when I was a student at Fuller Seminary. I have since used it in various languages with people in very different cultures around the world, making adaptations as needed. It has consistently proven to be a stimulating and fruitful way of engaging Scripture and God's people.

*If you are intrigued by this approach and would like to know more about its origins and way of working, my longtime friend Eric Miller and his team at InterVarsity's Twentyonehundred Productions created a video some years ago about our mentor, Paul Byer, who developed Manuscript Bible Study as part of his work with college students in the mid-20th century. It is entitled “Mark It Up!” and is available on **Vimeo** (<https://vimeo.com/44885451>). It is also available on **YouTube**, broken up into six short segments (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y5wKKmD6BrI>).*

Study Suggestions: In preparation for our time together online, you may find it helpful to do the following things.

1. **Print** out the file for the two passages in Acts that we will be studying. And, please print them single-sided. (*I know there are good reasons to “go paperless” and to keep to a minimum the number of sheets of paper we consume. But, many years of experience have convinced me that the vast majority of us will get far, far more out of the energy we invest in study if we work with printed pages—and pages printed so that we can see entire multi-page sections at once.*)
2. **Resist** the urge to reach for your favorite commentary on the Book of Acts. Consulting the work of those who have dedicated years or decades to the study of original languages, history and culture and the history of interpretation can be extremely valuable. But it is generally unhelpful to **begin** by consulting commentaries. Save it for after you’ve done your
3. Take the two passages **one at a time**, initially, rather than working through them together. In Luke’s original text, they are separated by many pages and some vitally important events. Ultimately, we want to see how they work together, but we need to approach each one on its own, first.
 - a. Read the whole passage quickly, once or twice, just to get a feel for it.
 - b. This is also a good time to glance quickly at what comes before each of our two passages, and at what comes afterwards. You may want to come back to this in greater depth later, but having at least a tentative idea of the larger flow of the story will be helpful.
 - c. Go back through the passage with some colored pencils, markers, crayons or pens, using a different color to mark each series of repeated words, phrases or ideas.
 - d. Jot down your discoveries in the margins—both your insights and your questions.
 - e. Pay special attention to surprises, and/or, things that seem not to make sense.
 - f. Identify the units of material (scene changes, focus or theme changes, etc.)
 - g. Look for comparisons, contrasts, progressions—any ways that Luke might have built into the text a flow to the passage as a whole.
 - h. Do you have a tentative sense of why Luke might have included each of these stories in his larger account of the launching of the Jesus movement? (These are such tiny slices of such a large book, it is perfectly okay to say, “no.”)
4. Now is the time to make use of background materials and/or commentaries. The Appendix to this guide contains excerpted material from the InterVarsity Press Bible Background Commentary on the New Testament (IVPBBCNT), by Craig Keener. It does not seek to be a full-blown commentary, but more of a repository of useful historical background information, arranged by chapter and verse (Keener has also published an enormous, 4-volume commentary on Acts that is available in both physical and digital formats.). You probably already have your preferred source for New Testament background. If so, great! This Appendix has been included in case any participants do not already have such resources. If it is helpful to you, great! If not, that is okay, too!
5. If you consult one standard commentary, try to consult at least 2-3, as this will give you a feel for what is a matter of consensus and what it is more speculative or idiosyncratic in each commentary.

Session 1: Samaria

1. In a sense, our specific story begins at 8:5 (first page, line 7), where Philip goes to Samaria. But our text includes 8:1-4 in order to help us appreciate that we have jumped into the middle of a larger story. If you have the time to go back through that story, it will take you at least to Acts 6:1. That is where we begin to learn about the developments in the Jesus Movement that led to the appearance of Philip, Stephen and the crisis that provoked Stephen's death and the scattering of... "all except the apostles" (8:1, our line 2). All except the apostles?? That should surprise us and lead us to look at chapters 6-7 more closely! But that is a study for another time.
2. From line 7 to the end of the page, Luke gives us two angles of view on what God was accomplishing through Philip: wide-angle and close-up.
 - a. The wide-angle view is described in terms that come right out of Luke's first volume. Who does Philip look like?
 - b. The close-up view provides an amazing contrast: how does Simon respond differently than, say, the authorities in Jerusalem? The slave-owners in Philippi (Ch. 16)? The silversmiths in Ephesus (Ch. 19)?
3. On page 1 line 22 (8:14), Luke gives us the very briefest possible account of how the apostles, back in Jerusalem, responded. Keener's notes in IVPBBCNT don't go into much depth about the relationships between Samaritans and Jews/Judeans, but you probably know quite a bit from other studies. And, you might remember an incident from volume one (Luke 9:51-55) that puts an exclamation point on that, for at least a couple of the apostles. Given that background, what might lay behind the decision in Jerusalem to send Peter and John?
4. Whatever the motivation in Jerusalem, what do Peter and John discover in Samaria? What, then, do they do?
5. Now is when Luke makes important use of the close-up he began developing on page 1. Here on page 2 lines 5-8 (8:18-19), how does Simon appear to understand what has just happened with the Spirit? How does Simon's analysis reflect his experience before the arrival of Philip?
6. Did Simon get it right?
7. Peter's response to Simon on page 2 lines 8-14 (8:20-23) is both strong a bit hard for us to decipher exactly. But the general point is clear. Simon wants ownership, control. Peter insists that God gives—God is in control. Is there anyone else in this story who might need to hear a message about God--not humans--being in control of the Holy Spirit?
8. Luke includes an amazing detail on the last line of this story (8:25). How do Peter and John behave on their way home? How does this line connect to a much earlier statement in this book, Acts 1:8? Has Luke shown us any of the apostles doing this earlier in Acts?
9. If Simon the magician was wrong about the Holy Spirit, and if what Simon Peter told Simon the magician is true, what might be the surprising lesson of this story? Or, to ask the question in a different way, given the general background between Jews and Samaritans and the specific background in the Gospel of Luke, why might God have delayed giving the Holy Spirit to the Samaritans until Peter and John had arrived?

Session 2: Ephesus

1. As in Session 1, here we are jumping into the middle of a story, as page 3 lines 1-7 make clear, Paul has just finished up in Corinth and stops by Ephesus on the way back to Jerusalem and Antioch. No need to go deeply into the events in Corinth, but at least one way to

understand the curious reference on page 3 line 3 (18:18) is that Paul responded to the fortifying vision he received in 18:9-10 by vowing to the Lord to remain in Corinth until his work there was finished. Upon completing his vow, he cut his hair. (See the commentaries for many other views on this.) One thing Luke does mention is that Paul responds to the request in the synagogue (page 3 lines 5-6, 8:20) by making a promise and leaving a kind of “down payment” on it... how?

2. While Paul was completing his visits to Jerusalem, Antioch and the places in Galatia and Phrygia where he had worked before (see Acts 13-14 and 16:1-6), the co-workers he left in Ephesus, Priscilla and Aquila, have a chance to some continuing education with an on-fire witness to Jesus. Page 3 lines 14-15 (18:25) says two things it is hard for us to grasp easily. But Priscilla and Aquila help Apollos to move from “accurately” to “more accurately.” It may be too soon to get a sense for why Luke included this brief account in the larger story of what was happening in Ephesus, but do you have a hunch?
3. In the interest of full disclosure: at page 3 line 14 (18:25), our translation says Apollos “spoke with burning enthusiasm.” That is an excellent translation. At the same time, note that Luke’s Greek here says Apollos was ζέων τῷ πνεύματι, “boiling (fervent) in spirit.” Only context allows us to decide whether Luke meant “spirit” (Apollos’ spirit) or “Spirit” (the Spirit of God). Almost all current English translations read the context as pointing to Apollos’ spirit and translate this as enthusiasm, fervor, etc. Since spirit/Spirit becomes a focal point in the next story, it is probably good to at least be aware of this.
4. After the now-better-equipped Apollos goes off to do great work in Corinth, Paul arrives in Ephesus and finds... whom? You will find debate about this in the commentaries. How do we know that Paul, at least, thinks something is not quite right with them? At the same time, Paul’s question recognizes something about them. What?
5. Luke does not tell us explicitly what it was about these disciples that led Paul to ask if they had received the Holy Spirit when they believed. So, one cannot be at all dogmatic here. We are all guessing. At the same time, what do you think Paul’s statement on page 4 lines 4-6 (19:3-4) might suggest? The contrast between John’s washing and Jesus’ washing appeared also back in volume 1 of this series (Luke 3). John prepared; Jesus fulfilled. One involved turning away from; the other, turning toward or embracing. Might that be relevant here?
6. How does this story help us to re-read Apollos’ story, and vice-versa?
7. When they enter fully into the reality of Jesus, the unnamed disciples receive the Holy Spirit like the community at Pentecost, the believers in Samaria and the believers in Cornelius’ house. What might Luke want us to see?
8. Ephesus turns out to be a place where more strange things happen, including one of the funniest stories (there are several) in Acts. What person from an earlier chapter in Acts do the seven sons of Sceva resemble? How does it work out for them?
9. The aftermath of the sons of Sceva story is pretty amazing in its own right. Who did what? Why? That is, what seems to be the takeaway that people drew from the story of the sons of Sceva?

Are there tentative lessons we can draw from what we have seen in Samaria and Ephesus?

(“Tentative,” because this is not yet even the whole of Acts, let alone, the whole NT)

What did Peter and John learn in Samaria?

What did Apollos learn from Priscilla and Aquila?

What did the disciples learn from Paul?

Appendix: excerpts from Craig Keener, IVP Bible Background Commentary
(Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1st Edition, 1993)

- 8:1.** It took persecution—mainly the scattering of the bicultural, foreign Jews—to get the church to begin to do what Jesus had commanded them back in 1:8. As the second-century North African theologian Tertullian pointed out, “the blood of Christians is the seed” of the church’s growth.
- 8:2.** Dying unburied was the greatest dishonor possible in the ancient Mediterranean world; even risking one’s life to bury the dead was considered honorable and heroic. Adult sons or those closest to the deceased would take charge of burial. Jewish law forbade public mourning for a condemned criminal, but for anyone else it was considered a pious duty. Stephen’s pious friends ignore the illegal ruling of the highest Jewish court to honor their friend.
- 8:3.** Prison was normally a holding place till trial; that Saul detains women as well as men indicates that he is more zealous than most of his contemporaries would have felt necessary (Gal 1:13-14; Phil 3:6). The only charge against the church members seems to be an assumption of their opposition to the temple, aroused by Stephen’s speech.
- 8:4.** Most ancient religions were spread by traveling merchants or other travelers more than by prominent individuals.
- 8:5-13**
The Conversion of Samaria
Having finished his first example of the Seven (Stephen), Luke now turns to his second example, one of those “scattered” in 8:4.
- 8:5.** “The city of Samaria” could refer to the Old Testament site of Samaria, now a pagan Greek city called Sebaste, dedicated to the worship of the emperor and full of occult influences (cf. comment on 8:10-11). But Sebaste’s people were Greeks rather than Samaritans, so the phrase probably refers to the main Samaritan city of the district of Samaria, Neapolis, on the site of ancient Shechem (cf. 7:15-16). This was the religious center of the Samaritans.
- 8:6-8.** Signs were accorded high evidential value in antiquity. That the modern Western educated elite tends to denigrate them is more a commentary on our culture than on theirs; most cultures in the world today (virtually all cultures not influenced by deistic rationalism or atheistic Marxism) accept diverse forms of supernatural activity. Thus those who reject miracles merely on the basis of philosophical a priori may do so as ethnocentric dogmatists rather than as genuinely open-minded intellectuals.
- 8:9.** Magicians usually drew large followings in antiquity; given the prominence of Jewish magicians in Greco-Roman antiquity, a Samaritan magician should not surprise us. Like the Old Testament, official leaders in mainstream Judaism opposed magic, but even some later rabbis indulged in sorcery, claiming simply to exploit insight into the secrets of God’s laws of creation.
- 8:10-11.** In nearby Sebaste many Greeks were synthesizing the various Greek gods into one universal male deity and the goddesses into another female one. This synthesis followed a trend that had been developing among some educated Greeks for centuries. A second-century Christian writer suggested that Simon claimed to be the avatar, or incarnation, of the male form of the deity, while his consort Helena was its female form.
- 8:12.** Familiar with Samaritan opposition to Judaism, Jewish people would have found this scenario remarkable. Already circumcised, Samaritans would have converted to Judaism by

baptism alone; but such conversion rarely if ever occurred, because it would have been tantamount to denying one's own people. For Philip, a Jew, to present the gospel in such terms that a Samaritan could follow a Messiah proclaimed by Jews would be viewed by many Jews as a betrayal of Judaism. Philip follows the same theological program of decentralized witness argued by Stephen in chapter 7 and outlined by Jesus in 1:8.

8:13. Judaism acknowledged that pagan sorcerers could do miracles, which most segments of Judaism would attribute to Belial (*Satan). The Old Testament taught that pagan sorcerers could duplicate some of God's signs on a small scale (Ex 7:11, 22; 8:7), but that their power was definitely limited (Ex 8:18-19; 9:11). Some writers have argued that Simon was not genuinely converted, given his subsequent behavior (8:18-24), but this issue depends on the meaning of "conversion"; like Judaism in the same period, early Christianity lamented not only false converts but also apostates (e.g., 1 Sam 10:6; 16:14; 2 Pet 2:21; 1 Jn 2:19).

8:14-25

Apostolic Ratification of the Samaritan Conversions

Philip's crosscultural ministry has broken new ground, of the sort which might draw opposition from some conservative elements in the Jerusalem church (8:12). It is thus important for Luke to describe the response of the Jerusalem apostles and the blessing of God on the work.

8:14-15. From a theological standpoint, the work of the Spirit is one package (2:38-39), but in the experience of the church not all aspects of his work are necessarily manifested simultaneously. Luke emphasizes the prophetic-empowerment dimension of the Spirit so much that he rarely mentions other aspects of the Spirit's work known in the Old Testament and early Judaism; this prophetic-empowerment aspect is no doubt in view here, although Philip's hearers were already converted in 8:12.

8:16. "Into the name" (NIV) is a literal translation that may reflect the language of ancient business documents, meaning that the converts have transferred ownership of their lives to Christ (or it may simply reflect the increasing ambiguity of Greek prepositions in this period).

8:17. Ancient Judaism provides rare examples of laying on hands for prayer (one in the Dead Sea Scrolls), but in the Old Testament hands were laid on to impart blessings in prayer (Gen 48:14-20).

8:18-24. The only category into which many Greeks could fit the miracles wrought by the apostles would have been that of magical works, but this text clearly distinguishes an amoral, magical interpretation of the miracles from the apostolic miracles, which are much more like those of Old Testament prophets. Sorcerers could buy magical formulas; no one could buy the Spirit.

8:25. After the new mission was pioneered by the bicultural witnesses of Acts 6, the apostles finally begin to catch on to their own mission (1:8). Far from the apostles fixing or correcting Philip's inadequate conversion of the Samaritans (as some commentators have suggested), the whole narrative indicates that they recognize and ratify the propriety of his work.

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18:18-23

Paul Returns Home

18:18. Cenchrea was Corinth's main port on the isthmus; it also harbored temples of Isis, Artemis, Aphrodite, Asclepius and Poseidon. Travel was easier, faster and cheaper by ship than by land. But ships were generally meant as cargo transports, so seafarers had to bring their own bedding.

Some pagan priests (e.g., of Isis) shaved their heads; hence a pagan observer who did not know Paul could have taken him for such a priest. But Jewish people shaved their heads after completing a Nazirite vow, and Paul's faith in Jesus had not diminished his own Jewishness in the least (21:23-24). That Palestinian teachers demanded that Nazirites fulfill the vows in Jerusalem shows only that Paul had taken the less Jerusalem-centered approach of Diaspora (non-Palestinian) Jews who had not the time or money to travel to Jerusalem very frequently.

18:19-21. Ephesus had a very large Jewish community. "If God wills" was a standard statement of pious Greeks and some Jews.

18:22. Summer winds were generally northerly but often east of north, which made Caesarea easier to reach than Antioch's port city of Seleucia.

18:23. Only by late spring or early summer was the land route from Antioch through Galatia and Phrygia open, another indication of the time of year.

18:24-28

Apollos's Enlightenment

18:24. Many Alexandrian Jews had names compounded with "Apollo," a prominent Greek god (Apollos may be a contraction for Apollonius). As in other ancient uses of the term, "eloquent" (NASB) or "learned" (NIV) most likely means "formally skilled in rhetoric," the more practical form of advanced learning to which well-to-do pupils could attain (the other was philosophy).

Alexandria may have had the largest Jewish community in the empire outside Syria-Palestine, with numerous synagogues. The Jewish aristocracy had worked hard to be culturally acceptable to the Greek privileged class, and they resented their own inferior status. (Most of the ethnocentric Greeks in Alexandria despised Jews and Egyptians, who made up the other two-thirds of their city; thus they spoke of "Alexandria near Egypt.") The clash of cultures and oppression of Jews ultimately led to a Jewish revolt-and the massacre of the entire Jewish community.

18:25. Ancient readers would most naturally take the phrase "fervent in spirit" (NASB) as referring to Apollos's own spirit.

18:26. Aquila and Priscilla apparently accompanied Paul on his voyage, then stayed to help in the synagogue at Ephesus, which was open to teaching about Jesus.

18:27-28. Letters of recommendation were standard in Greco-Roman society. Apollos's learning might well appeal to the educated elite of the Corinthian church (see the introduction to 1 Corinthians).

19:1-7

The Spirit Poured Out in Ephesus

19:1. Ephesus afforded an opportunity to influence all of Asia (not meaning the continent, but the Roman province "Asia" in what is now western Turkey). It was the most populous city of

the most prosperous and populated province in the empire. Although Pergamum remained the official capital of Asia, Ephesus became the chief city with the real seat of provincial administration. Paul's approach by the "upper country" (NASB) probably means that he took a higher road from the north instead of the customary route by the Lycus and Meander valleys.

"Disciples" means students, or learners, here apparently of John (19:3; but cf. 18:25). The Roman world was cosmopolitan, and other Palestinian Jews also settled in Ephesus, which had a large, ancient and influential Jewish community.

19:2. In most of ancient Judaism and in Luke-Acts, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit who inspired the prophets. Paul can somehow tell these disciples lack this measure of inspiration, despite much sound knowledge (18:25).

19:3-5. For John's baptism see comment on Mark 1:5; for baptism in Jesus' name see comment on Acts 2:38.

19:6-7. The tongues and prophecy, as inspired speech, evidence their reception of the Spirit of prophecy; see comment on 19:2.

19:8-12

Word Spreads in Ephesus

19:8-9. Philosophers often lectured in rented halls; this could have been a guild hall as easily as a "lecture hall" (NIV). (If the former, Tyrannus is simply the owner; if the latter, he is the customary lecturer. Public life in Ephesus, including philosophical lectures, ended by noon; so if Tyrannus lectured in the mornings Paul used it in the afternoons; if no one else lectured there, Paul probably lectured there in the mornings, and did his manual labor afterward.) Either way, residents of Ephesus would view Paul as a philosopher or sophist (professional public speaker). Many early Greco-Roman observers thought that Christians were a religious association or club (like other such associations in antiquity), or a philosophical school that took the form of a such an association.

19:10. Ephesus was a cosmopolitan center from which word would spread quickly, especially if Paul were training disciples (as philosophers and rabbis typically did) and sending them out to spread the message.

19:11-12. Paul's "handkerchiefs and aprons" (NIV) are rags tied around his head to catch sweat and his work aprons tied around his waist; they could have been taken without his knowledge. Magicians often healed by such means; Old Testament examples are rare but do occur (e.g., 2 Kings 13:21; contrast uncleanness, which was regularly communicated by touch in the Old Testament).

19:13-20

The Inadequacy of Magic

Although some Ephesians who knew no better may have regarded Paul as a magician, God seems to have healed them anyway to draw their attention to his message (19:11-12); but God would not tolerate unauthorized use of Jesus' name. Ephesus was widely reputed for its trade in magic and the need for exorcisms and protection against evil spirits.

19:13. Magical exorcists often invoked the names of higher spirits to cast out lower ones. According to magical theory, exorcists could coerce a deity or spirit to do their will by

invoking its name. Ancient magical texts show that many exorcists were Jewish or drew on some knowledge of Judaism, and these texts include every possible permutation of vowels as guesses for pronouncing the unpronounced name of God (cf. comment on 2:20-21). Some later ancient magical texts invoked the name of Jesus alongside other formulas, recognizing, as do the exorcists in this narrative, its efficacy when employed by Christians to expel demons.

- 19:14.** “Sceva” is a Latin name; as loosely as Jerusalem Jews used “high priest” for the highest members of the priestly aristocracy, it is likely that Sceva simply appropriated the title for himself. Inscriptions and texts testify to other irregularities in Jewish priestly claims outside Palestine. Because Jewish chief priests would be thought to have access to the sacred name (v. 13) and hidden names, especially of the supreme god, were thought to wield great power in magical circles, Sceva is probably highly reputed in those circles. “Sons” could mean they were part of Sceva’s guild, although it is probably meant literally.
- 19:15.** Ancient literature indicates that demons were typically unimpressed with orders from those who had no power over them, although they feared God and could be controlled by the manipulation of spirits more powerful than themselves (who apparently liked the influence this gave them with the magicians).
- 19:16-17.** This incident indicates that Paul, the humble leatherworker, has more power than the magicians (cf. Gen 41:8, 39; Ex 7:11).
- 19:18.** Despite the popularity of Jewish magicians, most prominent Jewish teachers officially condemned magic. When people recognize that Paul’s Jesus cannot be manipulated like lower spirits, they understand that he is a servant of God and not a mere magician. “Confessing practices” (NASB, NRSV) can also be translated “divulging spells,” an activity which was believed to deprive the spells of their power.
- 19:19-20.** Magical papyri were rolled up in small cylinders or locketts used as amulets around the neck; Luke’s term “books” or “scrolls” (NIV) probably refers to these magical papyri. These magical incantations were so common in Ephesus that rolls of these formulas are called Ephesia grammata, or Ephesian writings, in other Greco-Roman literature. Books were commonly burned in antiquity to repudiate their contents (in the Old Testament, cf. analogously 1 Chron 14:12). The total price of what is burned comes out to about fifty thousand days’ wages for an average worker.