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Powerful Encounters in
The Book of Acts
Acts 18:24-19:20

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The Normal Christian Life

Some years ago I read that one of the symptoms of a dysfunctional family is that kids growing up in a dysfunctional family will often guess at what “normal” is. When you grow up in a home where dad and mom are having knock down, drag out, screaming matches every night, or dad is an alcoholic and mom regularly covers it up by saying that dad just has a little headache, again. We need to be quiet, children. When you grow up in a home that is characterized by numerous affairs or serial monogamy where mom or dad is married 3 times, 4 times, 5 times, 6 times. The affect on children is that they often spend a large part of their lives guessing at what normal is.

I’ve talked with many adults who will say that they used to watch television as children and compare their family with the TV family, wondering “is the TV family really a normal family?” Now with television generally portraying dysfunctional families, kids growing up in dysfunctional homes can’t even use TV families as a standard or a norm. I’ve talked with many people who have communicated to me that they don’t know what normal sexuality is or what it feels like because they began experimenting sexually at a young age or were sexually abused and because they’ve had multiple partners and multiple experiences.

And because they're surrounded by friends and a culture that affirms all of those experiences and multiple partners, they don't know if the feelings they have, the habits they develop, the way that they think is normal or not. Is it normal for a married person to hook up on the internet with someone of the opposite sex and share with them intimate details of their lives? Is it normal to get divorced? Normal to use drugs or pornography? Is it normal for your teenager to have a major rebellion phase?

You know the word normal is tossed around so often that a person who goes to a counselor and says is my behavior or my marriage or my feelings or my kids or my faith, is it normal? We have to first ask back a question, "well, what do you mean by normal?" Sometimes by normal we simply mean "statistically average." You know, does this behavior or does this kind of relationship, does this attitude, is this attitude regularly found in a random sampling of the population?

By normal, some people are talking about, you know, a bell curve. A normal distribution of something. As America moves farther and farther away from Biblical patterns of behavior, the bell curve regarding relationships and attitudes and practices has radically changed in the United States over the last 30 years. It used to be highly abnormal, if you mean statistically average, it used to be highly abnormal to grow up in a home without your two natural parents living there. In 1960 more than 80% of American children were growing up in a home with their 2 natural parents. That percentage has now dropped to about 55%. And, in some inner city neighborhoods in America, the number has dropped to less than 20%.

In other words, if we're just talking about statistical averages, it has become normal for a child to not live in a home with his biological father and biological mother. Whereas 50 years ago, 1 in 10 married couples ended up getting a divorce, that percentage has been raised to 1 in 2. So it is statistically normal to be divorced and normal to have sex before marriage and normal in many schools for kids to take drugs. And it is statistically normal for teenagers to majorly rebel against their parents.

When it comes to issues of faith and the practice of Christianity, statistically surveys indicate that churchgoers feel no obligation to explain their faith to those who believe differently than them. It is normal in the American church to go to church and personally, perhaps, be enriched by that experience. But statistically you are unusual if you think you have an obligation to explain your faith or particularly to try to persuade someone who doesn't believe similarly to you about the truthfulness of your faith position.

In the American church it is abnormal to spend anytime volunteering to help in the church if we're talking about statistics. In the American church it is abnormal to read the Bible privately even once a week and highly abnormal to read the Bible everyday. I frankly have been curious for years regarding how this church would show up on a statistical survey. I would love to see a survey done of our church, the Vineyard, to see what our actual practices are. What we really do in our marriages, in our spending habits, with our leisure, regarding our reading of the Bible, our volunteerism, our sexuality. It's really hard to know because most people don't tell you the truth, do they?

So normal can mean statistically average. And of course that changes over the decades and in America that change has been mainly in an anti-Biblical, anti-Christian direction. Normal sometimes means healthy or sane. You see somebody downtown muttering to themselves loudly and you might tug on the hand of your little child and say, “Come, let’s step away from him, that man is not normal. He seems crazy, he might be dangerous.” You take your temperature and you find out that your temperature is 102. We say that’s not normal, you’re not healthy. Sometimes normal means healthy mentally, healthy physically, healthy spiritually.

As I speak about normal Christianity today, we’re moving in the direction I’m going to take the talk because I’m not just going to speak about what is statistically average, but what is healthy. What is wholesome? An even better definition of normal is “conformity to a standard, a pattern or a principle.” You might have a dress pattern and you cut out your material to sew a dress. To the extent that your cutout material conforms to that pattern, it is normal.

Now here we’re getting at the way I’m going to be using the word “normal” today. You see, in the book of Acts, I believe that Luke is trying to describe for us a kind of pattern, a type, a norm, if you will, for Christianity. He’s saying, “This is what Christianity looks like in its normal variety as it conforms to principles laid out by God. Here’s how people relate. Here’s what they believe. Here’s what they practice. Here’s their experience of God. Here’s my bottom line, friends. As we compare the modern church, the way that Christianity is practiced on the eve of this millenium, we find that there is an enormous divergence between the practice of the early Church and the practice of the Church today.

Now if we compare ourselves with ourselves we might find our behavior, our experience and our attitudes to be statistically average. But if we compare ourselves to the quality of Christianity that we find in the Book of Acts, we might say that our Christian lives are subnormal; that they're in need of radical repair in terms of our behaviors, our practices, and even our beliefs. We're going to find today that even at a doctrinal level, at a belief level, what is average, typical, in modern evangelical churches would not have been considered normal doctrinally in the book of Acts. I'm calling today's talk "The Normal Christian Life." Let's pray.

Let's begin in looking at the normal Christian life with Acts 18, verse 24. It says, "Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures." There was a huge Jewish community in Alexandria for several centuries where the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament) was translated. By the "scriptures" here, we're only talking about the Old Testament scriptures, the New Testament was not yet written. "He has been instructed in the way of the Lord and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately."

What is going on in Apollos' life is an incomplete understanding of the Christian message. He's a man who thoroughly understands the Old Testament. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, that is, the Christian message. But, his understanding fell short of full

orbed Christianity. Now you need to understand that there were thousands and thousands of people who became acquainted with John the Baptist or with Jesus at a certain point in their ministry. Maybe they heard John the Baptist preach and has received his baptism, a baptism of repentance to God. But soon after perhaps they had to leave the area where John or Jesus was working. Perhaps in some cases they only hear John the Baptist teaching, but they hadn't heard Jesus' teaching.

Or they heard Jesus teach but they didn't know about his death on the cross or his resurrection. And if they knew about his death on the cross, perhaps they didn't understand its significance. Or they knew about the death and resurrection of Jesus but hadn't heard about or didn't understand the pouring out of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. In the ancient world if you read through the Gospels and the book of Acts, it appears that there were thousands of people who had had some contact with John the Baptist or some contact with Jesus, who in some sense became followers of Jesus but were deficient in their understanding of the full and complete Christian message.

And so Priscilla and Aquila come along, having heard Apollos preach, and it says in verse 26, "...they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately." Now here is a good man with a genuine heart for God and yet even this good man who is giving himself to Christian ministry needs in this instance to be corrected doctrinally by Priscilla and Aquila. And I might just note that Priscilla here is obviously teaching a man Christian doctrine.

For those who say that women can never teach adult men or they can share a testimony or share a song but they can't teach and disciple a man; well it appears to me that you've got some real tension points with this text in which Priscilla who seems to be the more vocal and more extroverted and perhaps the more learned in her marriage. Priscilla is here teaching and discipling a male Bible teacher. Now what I see going on, friends, here is what I call normal Christian relationships. This is a pattern for us of the way that God intends people who are Christians to relate to each other. You see, we're going to spot, we're going to note deficiencies in one another. We're going to see each other's blind spots. The Calvinists used to say that sin was a sign on your back that everyone could read but you.

Each one of us has blind spots in our understanding of Christian teaching, in our doctrine. We have blind spots in our marriages, blind spots in our ways of relating to other people. Some of us have massive blind spots when it comes to our faults and flaws and we live in a time in history when it has become the accepted rule to not challenge one another, to not confront each other, to not assist one another regarding our failures, our flaws, our blind spots. It has become normal to respond defensively when somebody comes and challenges. "It's none of your business what I do in my dating relationship, in my spending habits. How dare you invade my privacy. How unloving of you."

Now, in the New Testament, love is often expressed by assisting people with their blind spot. It's not that the people in the New Testament were sitting around as the critics of the universe. I've been in settings like that where you're at a church full of Epicureans, of critics who were dissecting every word of the message to see if it met their particular taste. They dissected the worship and the vocals and the sound and the décor. That's not what we see

in the New Testament. It's not a bunch of church critics, Epicurean consumers determining whether something meets their tastes. And then speaking up when it doesn't. What you see are people who are genuinely concerned with another's well being enough to share with a person a word of correction.

You see, challenge and correction are all part of a desire to promote this other person's well being. What we're saying when we challenge someone about a blind spot or a deficiency is "I love you too much to watch you work yourself to death. I love you too much not to talk with you about your thinking or your bulimia or your relationship with the kids. I love you too much to watch you seek a separation or divorce without any biblical grounds. I love you too much to not talk with you about your distance from God and the growing distance I see in your life from God. I love you too much to not speak up regarding the error in your thinking or the error in your doctrine or the disastrous marital choice or dating choice you are making."

See, rather than being loving and patting yourself on the back because you're a person who never corrects or never challenges a Christian brother or sister, frankly your refusal to correct or challenge or confront is actually just the coward's way out. That's not New Testament Christianity. That's the easy way off the hook for us. The truth is that we would rather have comfort in most of our relationships than truth as the foundation of our relationships. The truth is most of us don't want to rock the boat in our marriages or in our friendships or in our small groups.

And you're looking at--and you may be surprised by this—but you're looking at one of the world's great wimps when it comes to really speaking up eyeball to eyeball to someone who has a problem. I regularly have to screw up my courage because, like all of you, I like to be liked and I don't like to be uncomfortable. So it takes a lot emotionally for me or for you to confront and challenge. But what I see here is such a loving commitment on the part of Priscilla and Aquila to Apollos' wellbeing and to the truth that they're willing to correct.

Normal Christian living is not about the absence of problems. Normal Christianity involves a commitment to a certain process by which we resolve our problems. New Testament Christianity is not about churches that are free of disagreements. New Testament Christianity is a commitment to follow a process by which we can potentially resolve our disagreements. We have lots of disagreements in this church and lots of blind spots and lots of personal problems. All of us do. And if we want to be normal Christians according to the pattern that we see in the book of Acts, we're not going to run away from other people's blind spots or run away when we're confronted with our own blind spots. We're going to commit ourselves to a process of getting things healed and resolved.

And what we have modeled here is the normal Christian way of handling blind spots in the life of another. It says "Then Priscilla and Aquila hear him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately." We have here a great example of the way to correct a person and the way to receive correction. They saw a deficiency in his teaching; they didn't publicly point it out. They didn't start a letter-writing campaign in which every single person who had ever been taught by Apollos received a letter pointing

out Apollos' errors. They didn't go on Christian radio blasting someone before talking with him privately.

What a disgusting state of affairs we live in in America right now. We have all kinds of so-called Bible teachers and Christian book writers who go on the radio and in print publicly criticizing the ministry of another church or the ministry of another man without doing what Priscilla and Aquila did. Privately taking that brother or sister aside and attempting to bring correction. If you're going to follow a Biblical pattern of challenge and correction, the first thing you want to do is privately correct so that you don't bring shame to the individual. If you have a problem, Jesus says, go and resolve it between you and the brother alone.

"If your brother sins against you", Matthew 18:15, "go and show him his fault just between the two of you." Don't solicit prayer support from everyone you know. Don't share with 4 counselors or dear friends to get their perspective. If someone has offended you, if you see something wrong and you care enough for this other person or care enough for the relationship to do something about it, then go privately. And go gently. Don't make it impossible for the other person to receive the correction.

I've often said that correcting another person is spiritual eye surgery. You're taking a splinter out of that other person's eye and you don't do it with a pick axe or a shovel in your hand. Eye surgery is a very delicate operation. The more gentle we are, the more likely our correction will be received. We affirm the other person. We affirm our affection for that other person. And in privacy and with gentleness we speak the truth to that other person in love. And you know, friends, these principles of correction apply even between you and

your spouse and you and your children. How do you do in correcting members of your own family?

Sometimes we practice Christianity with everyone other than our own family. I know at times that God has called me up short because I've related to my wife or my kids in a way that I would never relate to another Christian. I'd be way too embarrassed to yell or to use the tone with another Christian that I've used with my family. And in this text we also have an example of receiving correction. Apollos was obviously teachable because as the text goes on it says "When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia (that's Greece), the brother encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. On arriving, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed. For he vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ".

Here Priscilla and Aquila did the Christian thing. They didn't gossip about Apollos. They didn't withdraw. They didn't deny there was a problem, they went to him. And when they went to him Apollos received what they had to say and corrected his doctrine. You know, the more mature spiritually a person the more teachable they are. The Book of Proverbs tells us the test of a man or woman's character is the way they receive correction. "He who ignores correction despises himself, but whoever heeds correction gains understanding." Proverbs says the person who hates correction is stupid! The closer that someone gets to God the more they see that they have to learn and the more they recognize they have certain faults that they need to correct. The mark of a mature Christian man or woman is not the absence of flaws. It is the willingness to receive correction regarding those flaws and faults when we are challenged about them.

The more you learn the Bible, the more you learn of Jesus, the more you see that you've got a lot more to learn. In the first 2 years of people's Christian lives very often we are the world's great experts on all matters of Christian doctrine. We know everything there is to know. But the longer you go on with Jesus, the more you see that you've got a great amount to learn and you're not quite so certain about things as you were when you first began your spiritual journey.

Now it's important in normal Christian relationships—the kind that are modeled here—that we receive correction even if it's not delivered gently, privately. I know it's really hard to be corrected, especially if the manner in which the correction is delivered is not right or perfect. It's easy to say, you know, “well I don't need to listen to this other person because their manner, their tone, their approach was less than what it ought to be.” But you know, I think that in the Christian life we benefit the most when we say, “Lord, even if this person delivered that word of correction in a fashion that's less than perfect and less than loving, was there any truth in what they said to me? Is there anything I can profit from from what they said even if it was delivered in a less than ideal fashion?”

Don't you want that kind of humility where you look for the truth in somebody's statements? Ways that you can grow even if your spouse, your Christian friend, your parents, your child, your boss says something to you in a way that's less than ideal. You know, I've seen this kind of spiritual maturity in the church. I just want to offer the church a compliment. One of the qualities that I love most about the Columbus Vineyard is that I have found people to be highly teachable. I've just seen this Spirit in this church for the last

20 years. Let me ask you a personal question. How would you rate yourself in receiving correction? Can people correct you easily or do you make it really hard for others by being easily hurt, or overly sensitive to criticism? Is there anyone here who is never wrong or can almost never make a mistake?

Obviously we all have our problems and at a personal level we sometimes get defensive. But church-wide I have seen this church be highly teachable and highly receptive to the voice of God when it comes. And I believe that the teachable quality that continues here will result in this church continuing to be blessed by the Lord and continuing to grow. But if we become the world's experts, if we lose our humility, the blessing of the Lord will lift.

Let's look at Luke's description of normal Christian conversion. In Acts 19 we read, "While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus."

Ephesus is right on the western coast of modern day Turkey. It borders the Aegean.

"There he found some disciples and asked them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?' They answered, 'No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.'" So Paul asked them, "Then what baptism did you receive?" 'John's baptism', they replied. Paul said, 'John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.' On hearing this they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hand on them the Holy Spirit came on them and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. There were about 12 men in all."

Now when Paul gets to Ephesus he meets some people that Luke calls "some disciples" and it's very important for you to know at this point that throughout the book of Acts, when

Luke uses the term “the disciples,” with the definite article, “the.” When he refers to “the disciples,” he’s talking about Christians, he’s talking about the Church, he’s talking about forward followers of Jesus Christ. But when he mentions disciples without the definite article, he’s talking about a broader group of people, not necessarily forward Christians. And Paul meets this broader group of folks and he discerns very quickly that they’re lacking something so he says, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?”

Paul meets this group that Luke calls disciples. They have no evidence of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Their profession as Paul is talking with them feels hollow to him. Have you ever met someone who professes faith with whom you have an internal sense—you may not even be able to put your finger on it—but you have an internal sense that this person doesn’t have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ? Ever meet someone like that? They may be saying a lot of the right words. They say they believe that Jesus died for their sins and that He rose again but they seem utterly disconnected from any kind of vital relationship with God.

They seem to believe in Jesus in a way that you and I might believe in George Washington. Yes, I believe that there was such a person as George Washington who was the first president of the United States, who fought in the Revolutionary War. But his existence to me is almost utterly irrelevant in my day-to-day life. And I have no relationship to George Washington. This is the way that many people relate to Jesus Christ. Yes, I certainly believe that there was such a person as Jesus. I believe he was the Son of God and that he did die on a cross. But in terms of feeling really spiritually, vitally internally connected to this person, Jesus, no. There’s a hollowness in many people’s profession of faith.

Now as I've mentioned before, in the ancient world there were many, many people who became acquainted with John the Baptist or Jesus at some point in their respective ministries but did not get the whole message. These people obviously had come in contact with John, had heard about his message of preparation for the coming Messiah, a preparation marked by repentance in which a person turns from their sins and makes room in their life for a Messiah to be invited in. But they never really found the fulfillment of John's message. The fulfillment found in Jesus.

Now we don't meet followers of John the Baptist today. Such people no longer exist. But we do find millions of churchgoers like these disciples broadly construed who have not been brought into what I would call normal Christian conversion, the kind of conversion pattern that we read about in the book of Acts. And I want to talk to you about normal Christian conversion for a few minutes—the normal way that an individual enters the Christian life.

If you read through the book of Acts and look at every text in which somebody is brought from darkness to light, from spiritual death to spiritual life, from the position of being a non-Christian to being a Christian. You will see that there are 4 things that make up normal Christian conversion. Four things. Repentance, Faith, Receiving the Holy Spirit and Water Baptism. Let me go through those 4 again. The 4 things that initiate a person into the normal Christian life according to the pattern in the book of Acts: Repentance, Faith, Receiving the Spirit, and Water Baptism.

Now what we find in churches in America is the complete separation and shot gunning out of these 4 elements so that they occur in isolation, wholly disengage from the other elements. Some people will buy 1 of the 4 or 2 of the 4 or 3 of the 4. Over against the Book of Acts saying that this is a bundle that comes together and initiates a person into the Christian life. We in the western church today tease these elements apart so that our Christian conversion would have to be seen, at least from the perspective of the Book of Acts, as utterly subnormal.

What do I mean that we tease these things apart? Well, many people would separate repentance and faith. They would say to be converted and initiated in the Christian life you do not need to repent of your sins, you just need to believe. And so you'll hear people say things like "first you put your faith in Jesus and accept him as your Savior and then perhaps sometime later we hope you repent of your sins and you make Jesus your Lord." And I've met many many people who will say well, you know, I accepted Jesus as my savior when I was 15 but he really didn't become my Lord until I was 33. Some people will separate water baptism and the experience of faith and repentance in receiving the Spirit.

They will say, "Well, I became a Christian in 1975 but I really haven't felt led to be water baptized (that is immersed) but I never got baptized until the year 2000." Or "I just became a Christian through faith and repentance and receiving the Spirit but I just don't feel inclined to be water baptized at this point so I'll just put it off until I do feel inclined to become water baptized.

In sacramental churches in the Catholic tradition, in eastern orthodoxy, in some episcopal churches, water baptism is actually seen as the vehicle by which an individual receives the Holy Spirit and receives forgiveness of their sins. So the 4 elements, Faith, Repentance, Receiving the Spirit and Water Baptism actually become 1 element. And to be a Christian believer is the same thing as being baptized. Finally in the Pentecostal tradition some people were teaching 2-stage conversion, 1 in which you repent and believe, and at some later point you receive the Spirit.

What I would like to suggest to you today is that these 4 things, Repentance, Faith, Receiving the Holy Spirit and Water Baptism, were tied together in the Book of Acts as initiating a person into the Christian life and then while they serve different functions and they have a different place along the way, it was inconceivable to the early church that one could be a Christian without these 4 things in their life.

You see, repentance and faith were not separated by the New Testament church the way that some churches separate the elements today. They were 2 sides of the same coin. These things are inseparable. So inseparable that sometimes when the New Testament speaks about repentance, its implying faith and sometimes when it speaks about faith it is implying repentance. The 2 things are so implicit in one another that you sometimes could sum them up by just saying “faith” when you mean “repentance and faith” and sometimes “repentance” when you mean “repentance and faith.”

Repentance means to turn away from sins. Faith means to turn to Christ in commitment. It is impossible for somebody to turn to Christ unless they’ve turned away their focus upon

sin. It is impossible for someone to turn away from their sins without turning to Christ and so the current view that one could accept Jesus as Savior without accepting him as Lord is by New Testament normal Christian conversion processes. It's nonsense. I have no doubt that many people believe that Jesus died for their sins but are not living under his Lordship. Some of these folks have grown up in Christian homes and heard about Jesus dying for their sins all their lives.

What I'm suggesting is that from a New Testament perspective, their conversion would be subnormal. That kind of conversion statement doesn't register on the New Testament radar screen. I have no idea where such a person would be when they die. I fear that some would not be with Jesus because the basic New Testament confession is not Jesus is my Savior. The basic New Testament confession of the Christian is "Jesus is my Lord." And if you're taking notes, you might want to jot down 1Cor 12:3. A person who says I want to be saved but doesn't want to turn from their sins is contradicting themselves. What is it that you want to be saved from if not your sins. What is it you want to escape? Let me ask you a question. If you have asked Jesus to save you, are you living under his Lordship?

Salvation is not whipped cream on top of a pile of mud, a happy face plastered onto a broken life. Salvation is a changed life, a rescued life; someone pulled out of the mud. It is impossible, friends, to say yes to Jesus unless you're saying no to your sin. The 2 things are part and parcel of each other. Some people want, you know, the head side of the coin. But you can't say yes to Jesus and yes to your sin. You can't do it in conversion; you can't do it after conversion.

In describing this process of repentance and faith, I often will draw up a blank check when I share the Gospel with someone. And I'll say to them, "In becoming a Christian, it's as if you're signing this check," or draw up a check and write the date in which they're making their commitment to Christ and I'll write in the pay to the order line, "pay to the order of Jesus." And then I will say to the person I'm explaining the Gospel to "what do you think that you should put in the payment line? What do you think Jesus wants of you? And the person will sometimes say "My whole life?" And I'll say, "exactly! What he wants of you is your whole life. Have you ever signed a blank check and given it to Jesus? Here Jesus, take my whole life. You fill in what you want.

We don't come to Jesus in bits and pieces. Oh we discover what giving Him our whole life means over a lifetime. But normal Christian conversion is not first you take my finger then you take my hand, then you take me up to the elbow. Normal Christian conversion is my whole life and so we write that in. Then I'll say to them, "Okay, let's sign this and date it. This is what you're giving to Jesus." And so from the human side our action in salvation is repentance and faith. From the Godward side, God's action in saving us is giving us the Holy Spirit.

No one has been converted; no one can call themselves a Christian. No one has begun the Christian life without receiving the Holy Spirit. Christianity is more than our faith and our reputation. It is God coming and living in our souls by the Holy Spirit. Paul says that very plainly in Romans 8. He says if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, Romans 8:9, he does not belong to Christ. When Paul met these people who had not ever heard of the Spirit, he didn't say to them, "Well, you are already Christians and now you need a second

blessing.” He asked them what they were baptized into. In other words, “what message have you heard?” “Well we heard about John’s message of repentance and making preparation in our life, making room in our life for a Messiah.” And Paul says “Messiah has come and he explains to them the message regarding Jesus—his life and death and resurrection—and has them in that moment receive the Holy Spirit.

It is receiving the Spirit that saves an individual. Of all of the 4 elements, faith, repentance, receiving the Spirit and water baptism, the essential element in the Book of Acts to becoming a Christian is receiving the Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit a person is not born from above. They’re not born again. It is the Holy Spirit that changes that sort of hollow Christian confession where a person has that far off kind of sound in their voice. Yes, I believe in Jesus. But they seem to be unattached to Him. They believe in him the way I believe in George Washington.

It is receiving the Holy Spirit that makes the Christian life real and vital. Now I need to add something here. It is quite apparent in the Book of Acts that receiving the Holy Spirit was an experience. Unlike what many churches teach today regarding receiving the Spirit. This wasn’t just a doctrine. This wasn’t something that you just took in faith; that the Spirit of God came in without having any experience at all. When the Holy Spirit came into an individual’s life, they knew it. And I’m not suggesting that it was accompanied simply by a level of emotion. The Spirit of God coming into an individual’s life was often accompanied by certain spiritual gifts. In this case the Holy Spirit came on them and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.

But whether there was a certain level of emotion or even Spiritual gifts accompanying, nowhere in the Book of Acts do you have somebody receiving the Holy Spirit without having a profound experience accompanying that receipt. Many many churches are anti-experiential. They say “Brother, you just take it on faith that the Holy Spirit’s in your life.” But, according to the New Testament that would be subnormal conversion. Nobody in the New Testament just took receiving the Spirit on faith, they experienced Him.

Now I know there are psychological reasons, there are emotional reasons; there are theological reasons why we struggle with experience. All I’m saying is that normal Christianity in the New Testament could not have conceived of receiving the Spirit without an individual knowing that a change was being produced in their life by almighty God. The Spirit came in—the individual certainly would have been able to say, “something happened to me. I know I’m different. I’m not the same person I was. I feel God’s presence. I’m aware of God in a way that I wasn’t.”

And though I disagree with the Pentecostal’s two-stage kind of conversion—you become a Christian and then later on have this marvelous experience with the Holy Spirit—I absolutely agree with the Pentecostals’ insistence that receiving the Spirit is an experience, not just a doctrine. Again a question, have you experienced the Holy Spirit in you life? Are you sure He is there?

And finally water baptism comes in as the express of our faith and repentance and the outward sign of our having received the Holy Spirit. We need to be very careful here. A person does not receive the Spirit through water baptism. They receive the Spirit through

faith and repentance. Water baptism is not ever seen as the vehicle for an individual to receive faith. Water baptism is never seen as the vehicle through which a person receives the Holy Spirit in conversion ever in the New Testament. Water baptism is a separate element but it's tied to the first 3 as the expression of the first 3 elements. Again, we need to be careful here. In the New Testament a person is certainly a Christian before they're water baptized if you're posing the following hypothetical.

Let's say I'm walking up to get water baptized after repenting, believing and receiving the Spirit and I slip, fall, hit my head on the ground and die. Would I be saved? The New Testament answer is certainly yes. Repentance, faith and receiving the Spirit is all that is required to be converted. But normal Christian conversion in the New Testament involves this outward expression of one's Christian faith so that apart from this kind of absurd exception in which a person dies on the way to the baptismal, it would have been unthinkable for Christians in the Book of Acts to call themselves Christians without being water baptized.

Just as in a marriage ceremony, the ceremony is capped by placing a wedding ring on the finger of the bride and on the finger of the groom. So water baptism symbolizes our conversion and is so intimately linked with conversion in the Book of Acts that following on the heels of conversion one is immediately water baptized. Friends, you have not been initiated into the Christian life according to the biblical pattern if you have not been water baptized.

And if you've adopted the attitude that I can wait 2 years or 5 years or 20 years after my faith commitment and after receipt of the Spirit, you are functioning in an utterly unbiblical fashion. You would be unrecognizable to the early church as a Christian. I'm not saying you're not a Christian, I'm just saying your form of Christianity would not be on the radar screen of the early church. It's not normal. It's statistically average for the American average. But it's not healthy. It's not according to the pattern.

In the New Testament there's no such thing as the unbaptized Christian. Fortunately we are having a baptism next month and you can become a normal Christian.

So let's go through this and apply it to our lives. Next week I'm going to pick up the final 3 elements of the normal Christian life.

1. How willing are you to challenge another Christian's blind spots? Do you do this or do you just back away, not wanting to make waves?
2. How willing are you to be corrected? Do you handle correction with gratitude or do you just fall apart and become angry?
3. Do you live under Jesus' Lordship? Have you give him a blank check?
4. Have you experienced the Holy Spirit?
5. Have you been water baptized following your conversion?