

## IS THERE A NORMATIVE CONVERSION IN ACTS?

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In the Spring, 2002 issue of *Stone-Campbell Journal*, J.A. Weatherly, academic dean of Cincinnati Bible college, published a paper in which he undermines the use of Acts as a normative source for Christianity. This would make it impossible to use Acts to do restoration.

His argument is as follows. We are not allowed to use the book of Acts to do restoration unless it was the author's purpose to do restoration. But a close study of Acts will bear out that it was not the author's purpose to restore a normative form of the church. Therefore, we are not allowed to use Acts to do restoration.

Weatherly tries to show us that the account of conversions in Acts shows inconsistencies in the relationship of baptism to the reception of the Holy Spirit, and are evidence against the reliability of the historical material for constructing a restored account of the church. Here we refute his account of those inconsistencies.

### Weatherly's Alleged Inconsistencies in the Conversions of Acts

Consider Weatherly's offhand dismissal, made in *Stone-Campbell Journal* (5:93-113), of the historical material of Acts for constructing the Lord's intention for the application of baptism and reception of the Holy Spirit. Bear in mind that Weatherly chooses the relation of the reception of the Holy Spirit to baptism as a test case for his hermeneutic because restorationists are historically very interested in this problem. But he could have chosen other case studies.

### The Baptism of the 120 (Jn 3:22; 4:1-2)

Our Lord's baptism by John the Baptist was to fulfill all righteousness. But the *first* category of *Christian* baptism performed was Jesus' baptism of his disciples, before His death. The gospels are silent on whether Jesus baptized his disciples. But wouldn't it be hypocritical for Jesus to have the disciples baptize in His name, but to not baptize them Himself in His name? Or, it may be possible that Jesus baptized Peter, James, and John, and they baptized the other nine.

The *second* category of baptism, but the first Christian baptisms *recorded* is Jesus' disciples' baptism of others who wanted to follow Jesus (Jn 3:22; 4:1-2). This was not John's baptism; it was into the name of Jesus, before Jesus' death and resurrection.

After the Lord's baptism of His disciples (however exactly He did it), and then His disciples' baptism of respondents during Jesus' earthly ministry, the next baptism was

that baptism which validates all Christian baptisms, namely Jesus' death. This is the *third* category of baptism.

I claim, then that the "120" who greeted Pentecost had been baptized under the first and second categories: the disciples, who had most likely been baptized personally by the Lord, and the other "109" who were not the immediate disciples, but who were among the earliest church. Now the 120 were fully Christian and fully the church. They were obedient believers in good standing. They had most likely been baptized. And yet they had not received the fullness of the Holy Spirit. Doesn't this contradict Acts 2:38? Of course not. Jesus had told them the Holy Spirit in fullness had not been poured out on them yet. Was there a delay between being baptized and receiving the Holy Spirit? If they had been baptized, then the answer would be yes. If they had not yet been baptized, then this would mean they received the Holy Spirit without being baptized. Weatherly claims the 120 received the Holy Spirit before or apart from being baptized in the name of Jesus. Not only does he not have evidence for this claim, but from Jn 3:22; 4:1-2 it is likely the 120 had already been baptized and were awaiting the Holy Spirit promised in Lk 24:49.

Further, it would have been hypocritical for Peter to command baptism (Acts 2:38) if he and the other apostles had not already been baptized. And since Jesus had been baptized to fulfill all righteousness, and had commanded the disciples to baptize, would he not have baptized the disciples himself? So to see the 120 or the apostles at Pentecost as an "exception" or a "silence" is, we think, to invent problems where none exist.

### Peter's Pentecost Speech (Acts 2:38)

Weatherly accepts the straightforward reading of the text. However, Weatherly calls Acts 2:38 "programmatic" which initially sounds good to a Campbellite, until you realize that he intends to rigidly apply it as a boilerplate to all the other conversions of Acts. His treatment of Acts 2:38-39 on p.106-8 seems reasonable enough. Then isn't it enough to accept the apostle's command as a normative part of a restored church?

Consider Weatherly's use of "programmatic" to describe Acts 2:38: To the unsuspecting, this appears to be a tip of the hat to heirs of the Stone-Campbell restoration movement. However, by calling Acts 2:38 "programmatic," Weatherly is saying that the author of Acts is telling the reader that this is normally how conversions take place. But then it is ironic that nearly none of the detailed conversions in Acts follow his "program." So, then, Weatherly is using scripture against scripture to invalidate the idea that there is any normative conversion process.

The apostle's command is quite clear: repent and be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus; [then] your sins shall be remitted (washed away, forgiven) and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This simple command *is* programmatic, a pattern, trans-cultural and trans-temporal. We understand baptism as a washing from sin, symbolic of the divine work in us. All other instances of conversion can be related to this pattern. It

is a pattern because it is a command through an apostle. Although not every account of conversion is complete, it presupposes this pattern.

In addition, we have the explicit statement by Jesus from John 3:5: "Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." Clearly, by "water" here is meant baptism. So then Jesus' own teaching and practice is embedded in the command of Peter in Acts 2:38.

### The Samaritans (Acts 8:16)

Weatherly sees as problematic the delay between the Samaritans being [merely] baptized in the name of Jesus and their receiving the Holy Spirit only after the laying on of hands by Peter and John. Weatherly sees the delay in the reception of the Holy Spirit as being due to two factors: to demonstrate the unity between Jewish and Samaritan followers of Jesus and providing an occasion for a confrontation between the apostle Peter and the sorcerer Simon. The text indicates that, although they had been baptized, they had not received the Holy Spirit until the apostles laid hands on them. We believe this delay was consistent with Jesus' promise that He would bind what they would bind and loose what they loosed. God used the apostles to certify that the gospel was open to all peoples. The conferring of the Holy Spirit "well" after baptism at the laying on of hands would dramatically illustrate this truth, as well as underscore the Lord's certification of the apostles' preaching about Him. We do not see this as a problem.

### Cornelius (Acts 10:47, 11:16-17)

Weatherly sees Cornelius as having received the Holy Spirit before baptism, since Peter says he had received the Holy Spirit. We note that Peter immediately commanded Cornelius to be baptized and he complied. We interpret the case of Cornelius as follows: the dreams of Peter and the manifestation of the Holy Spirit are God's certification that Cornelius had received the gospel as a continuation of obedience which he had within the limits of his knowledge before Peter's speech of 10:34-43. God knew the heart (intention) of Cornelius and his house, and was pouring out the Holy Spirit in recognition of his openness and attitude of obedience. The questions to ask Weatherly would be: If Cornelius had refused to be baptized, would he have been saved? Or, if God knew beforehand that Cornelius was going to refuse baptism at Peter's command, would he have fallen on him by the Holy Spirit? We think the answers to these two questions is "no." We also note that Peter the Apostle did not excuse Cornelius from baptism but commanded him just as Jesus had commanded Peter to baptize. We interpret the case of Cornelius as God's opening the gospel to the Gentiles. Although in this case, the text says the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured on Gentiles strictly speaking before the administering of baptism, baptism closely followed so that in the NT they are never separable. The case of Cornelius might be considered an anomaly if we took Acts 2:38 to be "programmatically," Cornelius was baptized, and then the text said he did *not* receive the Holy Spirit. But this is not the case.

Suppose we assume that Acts 2:38 reveals a principle: if a person is baptized, then that person receives the Holy Spirit. The case of Cornelius does not violate that principle, even if Cornelius receives the Holy Spirit *before* baptism. The principle would only be false if someone were baptized and then did *not* receive the Holy Spirit. But we have no cases in Acts where this happens, including the case of Cornelius. So Cornelius' case does not invalidate the principle Acts 2:38.

#### Philippian Jailer (Acts 16:30-34)

Weatherly points out Paul's "silence" about baptism in 16:31. But in 16:33 the Jailer and his family were baptized at once. They weren't baptized accidentally. Paul must have commanded or urged them to be baptized. Or does Weatherly think that Paul neglected to urge baptism in 16:31 only to be requested baptism by the Jailer? We think not. This is another case of inventing problems where they don't exist. Weatherly blames "anticipated readers centuries later" as doing this, but he is just hiding behind them and using them as his mouthpieces. Weatherly tries to explain the absence of any command to be baptized in the account on the basis that "the author had larger thematic fish to fry." (p.112) I am in agreement with this analysis. But doesn't that mean that the incompleteness of the account does not thereby imply that Paul did not command the jailer to be baptized? Weatherly says that the author's exclusion of a command to be baptized is interpreted centuries later as implying its exclusion from conversion (p.112). But here, he is again hiding behind others, letting them be accusers of scripture for him. He is letting them be his mouthpiece, since he clearly has problems with the incompleteness of the accounts of conversion in Acts.

#### Apollos (Acts 18:24-28)

Weatherly says what Apollos teaches accurately about Jesus, is *zeon to pneumati* ("zealous in manner of presentation" or "in the power of the Holy Spirit") and that he may or many not have responded to the teaching of Priscilla and Aquilla by being baptized (p111). My response is to say that *zeon to pneumati* means "zealously." Although he was well versed in the scriptures (i.e., the Old Testament), he was deficient in his understanding of baptism. Had he refused baptism, he would have clearly been in violation of the Lord's command. Apollos was obedient to the extent of his knowledge. The correction he receives from Aquilla and Priscilla, as well as the correction which his converts from among the Ephesians receive from Paul, strongly suggest that he completed his obedience in baptism. We have no *explicit* statement from the text as to whether he was subsequently baptized, or refused to be baptized, or that he just slipped through the cracks. Can you imagine Apollos refusing to be baptized? Or can you imagine Apollos *not* being directed to be baptized by Aquilla and Priscilla, especially since that is what the text is suggesting is his deficiency? Although the text suggests that baptism was his deficiency and Aquilla and Priscilla corrected this, the text does not explicitly say he was baptized. But I think it is because it went without saying. This is another case of applying rigid critical methods instead of common literary sense.

## The Ephesian "Disciples" (Acts 19:1-7)

Weatherly posits the best explanation as being that these are, in reality, disciples of John the Baptist. The text gives no hint that these "disciples" are disciples of Jesus, and since disciples (*mathetes*) is ambiguous, we may accept as plausible Weatherly's view that these are initially only disciples of John. We class the Ephesian "disciples" with the Samaritans (Acts 8:16).

Weatherly says the Holy Spirit was not conferred until the laying on of hands, and he has a problem with this. Remember it was Paul who instructed and baptized the Ephesian "disciples." In Acts 19:6, we have no mention that there was a time-delay between baptism and the laying on of hands. It is reasonable that immediately upon their being baptized, Paul gathers them together, lays hands on them, and the Holy Spirit comes upon them, in dramatic demonstration of the validity of their conversion, their baptism, and the authority of the apostle. For all practical purposes, there was no real delay between baptism and the conferring of the Holy Spirit. Unlike most of today's "run of the mill" conversions, the Ephesian "disciples" of John become the Ephesian disciples of Jesus, and speak in tongues and prophesy by the Holy Spirit. They appear to be the nucleus of the church at Ephesus. Weatherly has problems with the apostles' laying on of hands. He wants the Holy Spirit to be conferred without the need for an apostle to lay hands. But Jesus said, "What you bind on earth, I will bind in heaven." (Mt 16:19) It pleased God to work through the apostles.

Critical theory has problems with God being God. Weatherly's analysis of the Ephesian disciples on p. 110-111 seems to support the integrity of Acts' presentation of conversions. My question, then, is why doesn't he say so? I believe it is because he is in the business of "problematizing" Acts and Acts 19:1-7 is yet another anomaly to his theory. So he glosses over it. The "problem" of the Ephesian "disciples" doesn't exist.

## Paul's First Account of His Conversion (Acts 22:16)

Weatherly accepts a straightforward reading of the text. However, he evaluates Acts 22:16 with the words, "undeveloped...but...unambiguous." (p.108) The most positive thing he can say about God's word is that it has no problems. He quickly in the next sentence lets us know that "elsewhere" Acts shows "apparent ambiguities about baptism." (p.108) The passages that pose no problem for him get a dismissive "unambiguous" and "undeveloped" (not an affirmative "consistent" or "shows integrity"). The passages with which he has problems get much more extensive treatment. This shows further that he is biased against the integrity of scripture.

As Weatherly does not challenge the integrity of the account of the conversions in Acts 2:41; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7; 8:26-40; 11:21; 12:24; 13:6-12; 13:48-49; 16:13-15; and 17:34, we do not comment on them further.

## General Remarks on Weatherly's Treatment of the Conversions in Acts

We now make some general observations on Weatherly's problematizing of these texts.

*First*, his treatment reminds me of many of the accusations against the integrity of scriptures made by those opposed to inerrancy in the 1970s. I find in Weatherly a tendency to side with critics who want to bring accusations against the scriptures, instead of bringing an attitude of faith and trust in the scriptures and attempting to find reasonable harmonizations and solutions to apparent anomalies.

*Second*, Weatherly wants to straitjacket God with Peter's statement of Acts 2:38. If Peter commands his hearers to be baptized and that the Holy Spirit will follow, presumably at the guidance of the Holy Spirit, then if God chooses to pour out the Holy Spirit on Cornelius and his house prior to baptism, then that is God's choice.

*Third*, if God chooses to delay the pouring out of the Holy Spirit until the apostles lay hands as in the case of the Samaritans and the Ephesian "disciples," we can be confident there were reasons—that is God's prerogative as God—and Peter's statement of Acts 2:38 was not thereby broken anyway. Weatherly wants to turn Acts 2:38 into a sieve that all other conversions must pass through, with all details ratcheted down so tightly that they cannot possibly pass through it. That is, his "programmatizing" of Acts 2:38 is designed to set it against God's other testimonies of conversion.

*Fourth*, we should consider the author's "thematic fish to fry": We may extract information from the text, as believers, of the theological propositions which the author intended for that time. And God supervenes on the temporal condition of that time to make His propositions through the author. But in inspiring scripture, God must take care to embed enough meaning and information/instruction into the text so that the church of every age can answer the questions it needs to exist in every time and culture. If God does not do this, then scripture is not complete as inscripturated.

Weatherly wants to say that many of the questions we have today (such as baptism's relation to salvation, the local congregation's autonomy, genuine reception of the Holy Spirit, and the proper organization of world missions) are not addressed directly as a part of the author's purpose in Acts, though he does claim that circumcision is addressed and need not be. Since Weatherly admits the issue of circumcision is unimportant today, Weatherly is actually arguing that scripture is locked into answering questions unimportant to the church today, but ignores important questions to the church today.

Although this theological move on Weatherly's part might make his position less usable by the church growth movement, his least common denominator theology on p.113 (i.e., his bland evangelicalism, his minimalist list of theological propositions) deprives the Stone-Campbell restoration movement of a rich storehouse of theological propositions which historically have put it at odds (or at least in tension) with the broader evangelicalism. This, we believe, is Weatherly's intent, and *Stone-Campbell Journal's* agenda.

I suggest that the early restoration movement writers emphasized certain issues in Acts because these were issues they were addressing at the time and that the denominations were mistaken on these issues. The restoration movement was serving as a corrective to the Body of Christ as a whole. The salient evangelical themes of Acts, which Weatherly lists, are there to be sure, but we know much more than he admits.

Weatherly would use as support for his thesis the fact that a veritable Christian socialism existed within the earliest church (p.113). Yet today it is non-existent except in some limited quarters. Perhaps a radical sharing of possessions as seen in Acts 4:32ff is a mark of the church we should restore, but fail to do so because of its sheer radicality and demands on us personally. Also Acts addresses the issue of circumcision but it is not an issue today.

We observe that in the case of Weatherly's article, once again, theological (or biblical) methods have their origins in philosophical methods. And as is the case so often, theological statements or biblical interpretation is packaged in such a way that one cannot readily recognize their origins in theological methods, which are in turn driven by controlling philosophical concepts. But the packaging of a set of biblical interpretations purely as biblical interpretations leads the unsuspecting to believe that to disagree with the interpretations is to disagree with scripture, without realizing that it is only to disagree with a human system, not with the Author of scripture.

Let us now consider the possibility and necessity of restoration. If we were to accept Weatherly's criterion of what are admissible theological statements, it is not likely we could do restoration at all. Consider that according to Weatherly's criterion of admissible theological statements, we may only extract theological propositions from a scripture writer if it is certified [by the scholarly consensus] that such a proposition was a part of the writer's agenda. But will the activity of restoration generally be among the purposes of the author of the original document? The answer is no. The purpose of the gospels is to tell us about Jesus. The purpose of Acts is to tell us about the birth and expansion of the church. The purpose of the epistles is to solve specific problems found within that church or churches at that time. But, in general, the epistles contain principles presented to the churches, perhaps for the first time. The church hadn't existed long enough for an epistle to be drafted whose central purpose was restoration! So the criterion, which Weatherly sets up and requires of a scripture writer before we can use his materials for restoration, is guaranteed in advance to disqualify the materials for use in restoration.

Perhaps this is putting it too strongly. There are propositions that can be derived theologically from the "purpose" of an author of a book of scripture. There are other propositions we might make in an attempt to do restoration. According to Weatherly, only propositions common to *both* these groups can rightly be used for doing restoration. The problem, of course, is that Weatherly has shunted off many additional

propositions, usable by the restorationist, but which cannot be certified as a part of the scripture writer's purpose.

Consider restoration from another perspective. The activity of restoration stands in a long line of attempts to purify the church of cultural accretions, and to locate the intention of the Lord Jesus for His church. A. Campbell referred to such influences as "paganizing" influences. Historical examples of reformation are John Hus, Wycliffe, Luther, and Stone and the Campbells. The fact that the church exists in the world means that unavoidably culture will enter the church. The church's local expression in space and time will necessitate cultural elements in its life and expression.

However, when does such culture begin to pervert the church from its purposes, from the intentions of the Lord Jesus? When does a particular practice begin to violate purity, holiness, and truth, and no longer reflect the presence of the Holy Spirit in that congregation in glorifying the Lord Jesus?

There must be guidance from God's word for us to make these evaluations, or the church will have no way to shield itself from the uncontrolled invasion of culture into its life. Since we are charged to not be of the world, we have a special responsibility to use scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to maintain a culture in the church which is to a significant extent separate from the world. The church should be a refuge from the world where one can especially enter into the presence of God. It should not be an emporium of culture, marketing, taste, style, uncontrolled speculation, political maneuvering, and all the other characteristics of a mere human organization.

If we do not have a theological activity called restoration, reformation, purification, or radicalization—whatever you choose to call it—we have no assurance that the way people "do church" in any age or place before the Second Coming honors and pleases Him. So we stand on the shoulders of all those who have sought to keep the Lord's church pure and committed to the truth, in love. This is the only path to a unity worth pursuing.

### Conclusion

The alleged inconsistencies which Weatherly sees in the conversions of Acts arise from the application of historical standards to scripture which are foreign to the historical methods used by scripture. It is not surprise that Weatherly should therefore find problems in the text. This type of problematizing took place during the inerrancy debate during the 1970s. It is not new.

The kind of reasoning that convulses when God sometimes supersedes His own laws of physics when He chooses to do so is called naturalism. It is a failure to acknowledge God as Lord over nature. The kind of reasoning that sees problems when God overrides what was thought to be programmatic is also naturalism. It is a failure to acknowledge God as Lord over His own covenant, allowing man to judge God in the fidelity to His own covenant.



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