

The Message of Acts – A Commentary by John Stott
Acts 8:1-40. Philip the evangelist

2) Philip, the Samaritans, the apostles and the Holy Spirit.

We return now to the questions about the gift of the Spirit which the Samaritan story raises. How is it that through the ministry of Philip the Samaritan believers received only baptism, ‘that and nothing more’ (16, NEB), and that they received the Holy Spirit later through the ministry of the apostles Peter and John? What did the apostles have that Philip did not? How are we to understand the interlocking relationships between Philip, the Samaritans, the apostles and the Holy Spirit? Behind these questions, however, there lies another and more crucial one. Does Luke intend his readers to understand the Samaritans’ divided experience (first faith-baptism, later the gift of the Spirit) as typical or atypical, normal or abnormal? Is it set before us as the usual pattern for Christian experience today, or as an exception which we should not expect to be repeated?

Opposite answers are given to this central question. According to the first, Christian initiation or becoming a Christian is a two-stage process, consisting first of conversion and water-baptism and secondly of the gift or baptism of the Spirit, so that the Samaritans’ experience must be judged normal. According to the second, initiation into Christ is a one stage event, comprising repentance/faith, water-baptism and Spirit baptism, so that what happened in Samaria must be judged abnormal.

a) Two-stage initiation.

Acts 8 is a major proof text for two large groups at opposite ends of the ecclesiastical spectrum, on the one hand ‘catholic’ people (Roman Catholic and some Anglican Catholics) and on the other ‘pentecostal’ people (classical Pentecostals, together with some neo-pentecostal or charismatic Christians in the other denominations). Both claim warrant from this passage for their belief that Christian initiation is in two stages, the second (receiving the Spirit) being accompanied by the laying on of hands with prayer. True, there are differences between them, in that the catholic scheme is largely outward and ceremonial, while the pentecostal scheme is largely inward and spiritual. Yet a striking parallel remains.

Catholics believe that the first stage of initiation is baptism, and the second is confirmation by a bishop regarded as a successor of the apostles, through whose imposition of hands the Spirit is given. This position can be traced back to Hippolytus and Cyprian in the third century. Cyprian commented on the Samaritan

incident thus: ‘Exactly the same thing happens with us today; those who have been baptised in the church are presented to the bishop of the church so that by our prayer and the imposition of our hands they may receive the Holy Spirit’. Modern Roman Catholic writers tend to give similar teaching. For example, George D. Smith writes that the Samaritan episode ‘bears all the marks of a normal procedure’.

Relying on the same passage, Ludwig Ott systematizes the Catholic position in this way:

‘(a) The Apostles performed a sacramental rite, consisting of the imposition of hands and prayer;

(b) The effect of this outward rite was the communication of the Holy Ghost...’;

(c) The Apostles acted in the mandate of Christ... The (sc. their) matter-of-course manner... presupposes its ordinance by Christ.’

Similarly R.B. Rackham, the devout Anglo-Catholic commentator, reasoned that because in Acts 8 the Spirit was given through apostolic hands, ‘the church has accepted this as the normal method’, and has perpetrated it in the rite of episcopal confirmation. The Anglican Prayer Book of 1928 gives the same impression. True, the text of its Order of Confirmation speaks only of the Holy Spirit ‘strengthening’ those he has already ‘regenerated’. Nevertheless, the preface to the service declares that ‘in ministering confirmation the church doth follow the example of the apostles of Christ’, quotes the Acts 8 passage as warrant, and explains it as teaching that ‘a special gift of the Holy Spirit is bestowed through the laying on of hands with prayer’, without clarifying what this ‘special gift’ is.

The Pentecostal churches, together with some (but by no means all) Charismatics, also teach a two-stage Christian initiation, but formulate it differently. To them the first stage consists of conversion (the human turn of repentance and faith) and regeneration (the divine work of new birth), while the second is ‘baptism in or of the Spirit’, often (not always) associated with the laying-on of hands by a pentecostal leader. For example, paragraph 7 of the Assemblies of God “Statement of Fundamental Truths” reads ‘All believers are entitled to, and should ardently expect, and earnestly seek, the Baptism in the Holy Ghost, and fire, according to the command of our Lord Jesus Christ. This was the normal experience of all in the early Christian church...’. Similarly Myer Pearlman, an Assemblies of God bible teacher writes: ‘While freely admitting that Christians have been born of the Spirit, and workers anointed with the Spirit, we

maintain that not all Christians have experienced the charismatic operation (i.e. baptism) of the Spirit, followed by a sudden supernatural utterance’.

In seeking to evaluate these viewpoints, we are concerned at this point to ask only one question: is the two-stage Samaritan experience to be regarded as the norm for Christian initiation? We do not deny that the Samaritan experience did, in fact, take place in two stages. Nor have we any right to deny that, having happened once, it could happen again, especially if the circumstances are similar. We must not infringe the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit. But we press the question: is it God’s normal purpose that the reception of the Spirit is a second experience subsequent to conversion and baptism?

To this question we need to give a negative answer (we come to the positive alternative later), because what happened in Samaria diverged from the plain and general teaching of the apostles. Initiation into Christ, according to the New Testament, is a single-stage experience, in which we repent, believe, are baptised, and receive both the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit, after which by the indwelling power of the Spirit we grow into Christian maturity. During this period of growth there may indeed be many deeper, fuller, richer experiences of God; it is the insistence on a two-stage stereotype which we should reject.

Moreover, no imposition of human hands is necessary for the accomplishment of the initial saving work of God. To be sure, the laying-on of hands is a significant gesture accompanying prayer for somebody, whether for blessing, comfort, healing or commissioning. And the Anglican Church has retained it in episcopal confirmation, although its purpose in this context is to assure the candidates of God’s acceptance of them and to introduce them to full church membership, and emphatically not to bestow the Holy Spirit on them. Therefore the Samaritan situation, in which there was a two-stage experience, together with the apostolic imposition of hands, was exceptional and is not to be taken as a norm for us today, either in Catholic or in Pentecostal terms.

b). One-stage initiation.

One possible way to handle the first half of Acts 8 is to say that even the Samaritans’ experience, although in two stages, was not the two-stage initiation which at first sight it appears to be, because either the first or the second stage was not initiatory.

Some argue that the Samaritans’ first stage was not a genuine conversion at all, but a spurious one. Campbell Morgan interprets their having ‘accepted the word of God’ (14) as a merely intellectual assent: ‘they had not received the Spirit

which brings regeneration, the beginning of the new life', in our day Professor Dunn has provided a thorough development of this thesis. He suggests that the Samaritans got carried along 'by the herd-instinct of a popular mass-movement'. They are said only to have "believed Philip" (12), which he thinks does not mean that they believed in Jesus Christ; and their baptism (like Simon's) was form without reality. Besides, since 'in the New Testament times the possession of the Spirit was *the* hallmark of a Christian', we simply cannot regard the Samaritans at that stage as having been Christians at all. Therefore their second stage was really their first. It was through Peter and John, not through Philip, that they became Christians.

It is an ingenious reconstruction, but it has not won general agreement. The main objection to it is that Luke gives no hint that he considers the Samaritans' original response inadequate, although he is clear that Simon Magus' profession was bogus. No, Luke writes that outstanding blessing attended Philip's ministry (4-8); that the Samaritans 'believed Philip as he preached the good news of...Jesus Christ' (12), so that it is inadmissible to divorce believing Philip from believing the Christ Philip preached; that they 'had accepted the word of God' (14) in the believing sense in which he uses this phrase elsewhere (e.g. 2:41 and 11:1); and that the apostles gave no indication that they thought Philip's ministry or the Samaritan's faith to be defective.

Others argue that the Samaritans did truly believe in Jesus, and that they must therefore have received the Spirit at that point in accordance with New Testament teaching. In consequence, what they received through the laying on of the apostles' hands was not the initial gift of the Spirit (which they had received at their conversion), but rather some charismatic manifestations of the Spirit. Calvin taught this: To sum up, since the Samaritans had the Spirit of adoption conferred on them already, the extraordinary graces of the Spirit are added as a culmination.' And reformed commentators have tended to follow him. They may be correct.

Certainly the statement that the Spirit had not yet fallen on any of them' (16, RSV) could refer to special gifts and graces. On the other hand, Luke never says that the Samaritans received the Spirit when they believed and were baptised, whereas he does use the language of 'giving' and 'receiving' the Spirit (15,17-19) as synonymous with the Spirit 'falling on' them, which suggests that what they received through the ministry of the apostles was the initial gift of the Spirit.

Although these two reconstructions are mutually exclusive, they have one thing in common. They both affirm that the Samaritans' initiation into Christ was a

one-stage event, because they deny that the other stage was initiatory. According to the first view, stage one was a spurious conversion and irregular baptism, so that stage two was the full initiation, including faith and the gift of the Spirit.

According to the second view, stage one was the Samaritans' full initiation, including their conversion and reception of the Spirit, so that stage two was not initiatory but a subsequent charismatic endowment. In both cases, by eliminating one of the two stages (either declaring the first bogus or the second supplementary), the same result is achieved, namely a one-stage initiation into Christ.

Neither reconstruction is satisfactory, however, since Luke does seem to understand stage one as a genuine conversion, and stage two as the initial reception of the Spirit. In that case, because Luke describes a two-stage initiation in Samaria, the alternative explanation is to regard it as having been altogether unusual. There are two main indications of this, namely that it deviated both from the normal teaching and from the normal practice of the apostles.

Take the apostles teaching. It is always dangerous to isolate any passage of Scripture, and always wise to interpret Scripture by Scripture. What, then, is the general teaching of Scripture about receiving the Spirit? According to Peter's first sermon, forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit are twin initial blessings which God bestows on everyone whom he calls, and who repents, believes and is baptised (2:38-39). Further, Paul agrees with Peter. God gives his Spirit to all his children, so that 'if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ' (Rom. 8:9; cf. Rom. 8:14-16; 1 Cor. 6:19; Gal. 3:2, 14; 4:6).

Now Luke must have been very familiar with apostolic teaching, for he was Paul's constant travelling companion, and it is he who records Peter's instruction in Acts 2:38-39. No wonder, therefore, that we detect a note of surprise in his narrative when he describes the Samaritans as not having received the Spirit, but as having 'simply' (NIV) or 'only' (RSV) been baptised into Christ. '*Only*' implies that two things were expected or accustomed to go together'. But, contrary to expectation, water-baptism had been received without Spirit-baptism, the sign without the thing signified. There was, Luke implies, something distinctly odd about their separation. It was because of this irregularity, Professor Dunn writes, that 'the two senior apostles came down hot-foot from Jerusalem to remedy a situation which had gone seriously wrong somewhere'.

The second deviation was from the apostles' practice. Luke tells us on this occasion the college of the apostles, if we may so call them, sent a delegation of its two leading members to evaluate what was going on in Samaria. This is unique. The apostles did not normally cast themselves in the role of 'inspectors of evangelism'. On other occasions when people received the gospel, the apostles did not come and investigate, or feel it necessary to add their imprimatur to what had been done. They did not do it with regard to either the evangelism of other Christians mentioned at the beginning of the chapter (1, 4) or the conversion of the Ethiopian related at its end (26-40). 'The picture of the apostles scurrying hither and thither up and down the eastern end of the Mediterranean in an attempt to keep up with the rapid expansion of the Christian gospel, with little time for anything but "confirmation services", is amusing but incredible'.

So why was it necessary for an official apostolic delegation to scrutinize and confirm the work of Philip? And why in any case was the Spirit not given through Philip himself who had done the preaching and the baptising? For what special reason could God have withheld the Spirit? There is no indication that Philip's teaching was defective. Otherwise the apostles would have supplemented it, whereas what they did was pray for and lay hands on the Samaritans, not instruct them.

The most natural explanation of the delayed gift of the Spirit is that this was the first occasion on which the gospel had been proclaimed not only outside Jerusalem but inside Samaria. This is clearly the importance of the occasion in Luke's unfolding story, since the Samaritans were a kind of half-way house between Jews and Gentiles. Indeed, 'the conversion of Samaria was like the first-fruits of the calling of the gentiles'. The nearest equivalents to the investigation by Peter and John were when the Gentiles first believed. When Cornelius was converted, the apostles asked Peter to explain his actions (11:1-18), and when Greeks turned to the Lord in Antioch, Barnabus was sent there to reconnoiter the situation (11:20-24).

As we saw earlier, the Samaritan schism had lasted for centuries. But now the Samaritans were being evangelized, and were responding to the gospel. It was a moment of significant advance, which was also fraught with great peril. What would happen now? Would the long-standing rift be perpetrated? The gospel had been welcomed by the Samaritans, but would the Samaritans be welcomed by the Jews? Or would there be separate factions of Jewish Christians and Samaritan Christians in the church of Jesus Christ? The idea may seem unthinkable in theory;

in practice it might well have happened. There was a real ‘danger...of their tearing Christ apart, or at least of forming a new and separate church for themselves’.

Is it not reasonable to suggest (in view of this historical background) that, in order to avoid such a disaster, God deliberately withheld the Spirit from these Samaritan converts? The delay was only temporary, however, until the apostles had come down to investigate, had endorsed Philip’s bold policy of Samaritan evangelism, had prayed for the converts, had laid hands on them as ‘a token of fellowship and solidarity’, and had thus given a public sign to the whole church as well as to the Samaritans converts themselves, that they were *bona fide* Christians, to be incorporated into the redeemed community on precisely the same terms as Jewish converts. To quote Geoffrey Lampe again, ‘at this turning-point in the mission something else was required in addition to the ordinary baptism of the converts. It had to be demonstrated to the Samaritans beyond a shadow of doubt that they had really become members of the church, in fellowship with the original “pillars”.... An unprecedented situation demanded quite exceptional methods’. This seems to be the only explanation which takes account of all the data of Acts 8, reads the story in its historical context of the developing Christian mission, and is consistent with the rest of the New Testament. It is also becoming increasingly accepted on both sides of the Charismatic divide.

Although J.I. Packer calls it no more than a ‘guess’, he adds that it ‘seems rational and reverent’. Similarly, Michael Green sees the delay as ‘a divine veto on schism in the infant church, a schism which could have slipped almost unnoticed into the Christian fellowship, as converts from the two sides of the “Samaritan curtain” found Christ without finding each other. That would have been the denial of the one baptism and all it stood for. At all events, the action of the apostles appears to have been effective. Henceforward, Jews and Samaritans were to be admitted into the Christian community without distinction. There was one body because there was one Spirit.

To sum up, the Samaritan happening provides no biblical warrant either for the doctrine of a two-stage Christian initiation as the norm, or for the practice of an imposition of hands to inaugurate the supposed second stage. The official visit and action of Peter and John were historically exceptional. These things have no precise parallels in our day, because there are no longer any Samaritans or any apostles of Christ. Today, because we are not Samaritans, we receive forgiveness and the Spirit together the moment we believe. As for the laying on of hands, although it can be an appropriate and helpful gesture in various contexts, its use as the means by which the Spirit is given and received lacks authority, whether in

episcopal confirmation or in charismatic ministry, because neither bishops nor pentecostal leaders are apostles comparable to Peter and John, any more than Philip was, although directly appointed by them.