

The Book Of Acts: Verse-by-Verse

Acts 8:13-19

As we finished last time, we asked the question, “What about Simon?” I told you that this has been a sticky theological problem for many New Testament scholars and theologians.

Some commentators have taken the position that Simon’s experience wasn’t valid. Other have said that Simon pretended to become a Christian to join Philip’s inner circle.

As I finished, I said that I think it is much more likely that Philip accepted Simon Magus as a fellow believer. Wouldn’t Philip have opposed Simon’s request to be baptized if he entertained any doubts about the genuineness of his conversion?

Considering all this, we ought to take Luke’s words for what they were intended to mean: “Simon himself believed and was baptized.” In verse 13 we simply read: “Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.”

At this point, Luke temporarily diverts his narrative about Simon Magus and tells us about the Jerusalem leadership’s response to the Samaritans’ newfound faith in Christ. Let’s read verses 14-17:

“When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and

John to them. 15 When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, 16 because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. 17 Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.”

Evidently, it didn't take long for the apostles to hear of Philip's success in Samaria. Samaria was nearly 70 miles from the Church's Jerusalem epicenter. It would take the average person about 22 hours to walk from Samaria to Jerusalem.

Again, let's take Luke's words for face value. What does he tell Theophilus, his Gentile friend? “When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them.”

Here again, we have the plain facts. The Samaritans had accepted the Word of God. We tend to read these words quickly, but New Testament scholars suggest that Luke is indicating something much more profound than our English word “accepted” implies.

As John Stott sees it, Luke's use of the phrase, “accepted the Word of God” is “almost a technical expression by which Luke signals an important new stage in the advance of the gospel.” – John Stott

If we look back to the prior chapters of Acts, we see Luke used this phrase to describe the response of some 3,000 persons to Peter's Day of Pentecost sermon. He says they “accepted Peter's message” – Acts 2:41.

After using the same phrase to describe Samaria's reception of the Gospel, Luke will go on to use the same

language in the Acts 11 salvation of Cornelius, his family, and many of his friends.

With this in mind, we can understand why “accepting the good news” takes on a very important technical sense in Luke’s narrative.

Returning to the text, when the apostle heard that the Samaritans had “accepted the Word of God” they dispatched both Peter and John.

Almost any Jewish person would have viewed this as a remarkable situation. As John Stott notes, “It is hard for us to conceive the boldness of the step Philip took in preaching the gospel to Samaritans. For the hostility between Jews and Samaritans had lasted a thousand years.” – John Stott

We should ask, “Why did the apostles at Jerusalem send representatives from their original number to Samaria?” There are at least two primary reasons for this:

On the positive side, Philip’s success in Samaria took place nearly three years after the initial outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. For three years, the apostles’ efforts had largely been focused on Jerusalem.

That fact, alone, has raised a lot of discussion. Let me explain. Given Jesus’ command for his followers to take the good news to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth, there seems to have been a long delay.

Some historians, such as Don Richardson, suggest this fact shows a resistance to obey Jesus’ Great Commission. He writes, “Hundreds of millions of Christians

think that Luke's Acts of the Apostles records the 12 apostles' obedience to the Great Commission. Actually it records their reluctance to obey it." (Don Richardson, *Eternity in their Hearts*, p. 197.)

Luke doesn't explain why the three-year delay took place. He chooses to forward the Acts narrative to the point where Philip – in part – takes the gospel to Samaria during an outbreak of persecution. As such, the Samaritan events are a continuation of the spread of the Gospel.

Given these facts, Philip's success at Samaria marked a new expansion of the Gospel. In anyone's eyes, this would have been a large step forward.

The second reason for sending Peter and John creates yet another valid point of discussion. In verses 15-16 Luke records, "When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus."

I think it's important to understand that Luke is not writing this account as a theologian, but as a historian. Certainly, he could have added a lot more theological information to this story, but he chose to simply relate the facts.

So what was happening at Samaria? Many of these half-Jew, half-Gentiles were being saved and baptized. Many were also healed and delivered from demonic bondage. This was well in keeping with what had previously happened in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost and the months following.

It's what had not happened that concerned the apostles at Jerusalem. Luke says, "... the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them..." – v. 16

Dr. Howard Marshall once wrote that verse 16 is, "perhaps the most extraordinary statement in Acts." How could the Samaritans be saved and baptized, but not experience the Holy Spirit coming upon them?

It's here that we must acknowledge something: There are not always simple answers to our questions. The Samaritans' experience represents something unusual in the Christian experience. Perhaps the question we should be asking is, "What did it mean?"

This is where the great debate among theologians about a "one-stage" or "two-stage" salvation finds its core. Let me explain these positions and eventually come back to the question, "What did the Samaritans' experience mean?"

Historically there have been three dominant answers to this question involving what we might call "One-Stage Salvation", "Two-Stage Salvation", and a modification of "One-Stage Salvation". Let me outline these views for you.

- **One-Stage Salvation:**

Some theologians – and even denominations – believe that there can only be one stage of salvation. In other words, taking their cue from Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost, they note Peter's statement:

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of

your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.” - Acts 2:38

As these groups see it, when someone believes the gospel, they automatically receive the Holy Spirit. That is why they call it a “one-stage” salvation.

If that is the case, how do they explain the Samaritans’ experience of “accepting the Word of God”, but later receiving the evidence of the Spirit?

Perhaps the greatest spokesperson for this explanation was G. Campbell Morgan – one the best theologians of his day. Morgan wrote an extensive commentary on this issue.

In short, he suggested that Luke’s statement in verse 12 that, “they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God” meant that the Samaritans had believed Philip but had not yet been saved, even though they had been baptized.

Campbell goes on to say that it wasn’t until Peter and John arrived that the Samaritans believed and received the Holy Spirit.

While Campbell’s thesis contains some interesting notions, it has never gained majority acceptance. One of the main reasons is that Luke never indicated any doubts as to the genuineness of their response to the good news.

To the contrary, his Greek phraseology makes it clear they “accepted the Word of God” – meaning, they had

accepted Christ and been legitimately baptized.

- **“Two-Stage Salvation”:**

The second view – “Two-Stage Salvation” is endorsed by two groups that we normally consider worlds apart: Roman Catholicism and Pentecostalism.

Roman Catholics hold the view that the first stage of salvation or initiation is water baptism. This is followed by the reception of the Holy Spirit which is transmitted through the “laying on of hands” by a bishop – who is regarded as a successor of the apostles.

This view can be traced back to the third-century Church fathers, Hippolytus, and Cyprian. Reflecting on the Acts 8 Samaritan story, here is what Cyprian wrote:

“Exactly the same thing happens with us today; those who have been baptized in the church are presented to the bishops of the church so that by our prayer and the imposition of our hands they may receive the Holy Spirit.”

Some Pentecostals – and to a large degree – Charismatics, hold to a “two-stage” experience as well, but do not see it the same way Roman Catholics do.

For them, the first stage involves repentance, faith, and water baptism. However, a second stage, called the “Baptism in or of the Spirit, is often associated with the laying-on of hands by a Pentecostal leader.

An additional sign of this “Baptism in or of the Spirit” is identified as “a sudden supernatural utterance”, normally identified as “speaking in tongues”.

These Pentecostals and Charismatics suggest that the Samaritan experience was not exceptional, but the norm.

In part, they base this view on the fact that the 120 Galileans who received the “Gift of the Spirit” on the Day of Pentecost followed the same pattern. They had previously accepted Christ as Savior and were subsequently baptized in the Holy Spirit.

Before I move on to the “Middle View”, let me note that in recent times, the “Two-Stage” view has been the subject of debate within the ranks of Pentecostals and Charismatics.

The insistence on the “Baptism in or of the Holy Spirit” with the accompanied proof of “speaking in tongues” is facing modification by those who have been identified as “Neo-Pentecostals” or “Neo-Charismatics”.

I bring this up, because this group is becoming more aligned with the last view I want to cover – The “Middle View”.

- **The “Middle” View:**

The Protestant Reformer John Calvin formulated what we might call the “Middle View” on the Samaritan experience. In essence, Calvin avoids the “One-Stage” or “Two-Stage” positions, by suggesting a blend that can be seen in the Samaritans’ experience.

As Calvin saw it, the Samaritans truly believed in Jesus and therefore received the Spirit – just as the New Testament suggests. Calvin insisted that the what the Samaritans received when Peter and John laid their

hands on them was not the initial infilling of the Spirit, (which they previously received when they “accepted the Word of God), but rather some charismatic manifestations of the Spirit.

Here's how Calvin put it: “... Since the Samaritans had the Spirit of adoption conferred on them already, the extraordinary grace of the Spirit are added as a culmination.” – Calvin, I, p. 236

In line with Calvin’s position, many commentators have understood the statement that the Spirit “had not yet fallen on any of them” to refer to special gifts of the Spirit.

While Calvin’s position not without issues, it does provide a middle ground for understanding what happened to the Samaritans – and why their experience does not appear to be normative in the rest of the book of Acts.

Now that we have looked at the question, “What happened at Samaria?” and given some possible answers, let’s come back to the question, “What did the Samaritans’ experience mean?” In other words, “Why did the Samaritans have what appears to be a two-stage experience?”

Of all the answers I have looked at, the one that seems to have a lot of merit is offered by two eminent theologians – even though they hold opposite views on some issues. You will hear me cite their commentaries regularly, because they are some of the most solid evangelical theologians of the 20th century.

One is John R.W. Stott, an English Anglican cleric and theologian who was noted as a leader of the worldwide

evangelical movement. He was one of the principal authors of the Lausanne Covenant in 1974.

The Lausanne Covenant was, in essence a call to churches around the world to work together to make the Gospel known universally. It's estimated that 85% of the Latin American churches use the Lausanne Covenant as their statement of faith.

The other eminent scholar I reference a lot is F.F. Bruce. He was known worldwide as the "Dean of Evangelical Scholarship. Bruce was a staunch supporter of the historical reliability of the New Testament.

He was educated in the classics at the University of Aberdeen and Cambridge University. He taught at Edinburgh, Leeds, and Sheffield university, and was the Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis at the University of Manchester.

What I find interesting is that both men, independent of one another, postulated a similar thesis for why the Samaritan experience of the Holy Spirit was delayed between the time they accepted Philip's preaching and were baptized to Peter and John's arrival some days, if not weeks later.

I'm going to take Bruce's and Stott's thesis and blend their information into a summary. Here's how the two men explain the time gap between the Samaritan believers' salvation, baptism, and their reception of the Holy Spirit.

Stott initiates his analysis of the Samaritan situation by writing, "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.” – John Stott

As I have noted a couple of times, the cultural division between the Samaritans and Jews had lasted for more than a century. But with Philip’s preaching about Jesus, this much maligned group was responding favorably to the Gospel.

This was, by far, an unexpected result. The Samaritans were neither full Jews nor full Gentiles. They were something between the two – some having more Jewish D.N.A. and others having more Gentile D.N.A.

In either case, they were still on the fringes of society. They weren’t fully accepted by either the Jews or the Gentiles. In a way, they were the “no man’s land” of 1st-century culture and theology.

We won’t see another real foray into Gentile territory until Peter is sent to Cornelius’ home, after being warned by the Holy Spirit not to view these Gentiles as unclean. The Jewish mindset against the goyim was abundantly clear when, afterwards, even Peter had to explain why head entered the home of a Gentile.

When we look at it through this lens, it becomes clear that the Samaritans reception of the gospel presented a positive advance of the Gospel, but also had the potential for disaster!

For centuries the Jews and Samaritans had squared off against each other. Both claimed to have a singular revelation of God’s Word. Both claimed their place of worship was the only relevant site. Even Jesus noted this when he spoke to the woman at the well.

She told Jesus, “I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.” – John 4:19-20

Jesus told her, “Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews.” – John 4:21-22

Now that the Samaritans were accepting the Word of God, what would happen? Would the Messianic Jews accept the Samaritans as full brothers and sisters in Christ, or would they reject them again – forcing the Samaritans to develop a separate track of salvation and discipleship?

In other words, would the Messianic Jews and Messianic Samaritans end up with two separate churches?

Historically, the Jews and Samaritans had practiced two different forms of Judaism, so it's not difficult to see how this might continue even into the New Testament period. There was a real danger of a permanent division – even though both groups claimed Jesus as their Messiah.

Stott and Bruce both suggest that the Jerusalem apostles would have questioned Philip's ministry in Samaria. Remember, it was three years after Pentecost – and aside from the Hellenistic Jews who had been converted, the Church was still very much restricted to Jerusalem.

News that the Samaritans were being saved and miracles were taking place must have come as a

surprise. The logical thing for the apostles to do was to send some representatives to speak with Philip and ascertain whether these conversions were genuine.

Here's the question that John Stott asks in his Acts Commentary: "Is it not reasonable to suggest (in view of this historical background) that ... God deliberately withheld the Spirit from these Samaritan converts ... until the apostles had come down to investigate[?]" – John Stott

F.F. Bruce clarifies Stott's question when he writes, "It was one thing for them to be baptized by a free-lance evangelist like Philip, but not until they had been acknowledged and welcomed by the leaders of the Jerusalem church did they experience the signs which confirmed and attested their membership in the Spirit-possessed society." – F.F. Bruce

Here's what these theologians are suggesting: God delayed the giving of the manifestations of the Holy Spirit until Peter and John had arrived and could give the apostles' blessing to a group who had been traditionally marginalized.

As Luke simply records that moment, "Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit." – Acts 8:17. We are not told what manifestations occurred, but it was enough, as we will see, that Simon Magus offered Peter and John money for the ability to "give" the Holy Spirit to others.

Okay, let me round out this teaching. Bruce and Stott's thesis that God withheld the manifestations of the Spirit until Peter and John could visit the Samaritans and give

their blessings by extending full fellowship to them, makes sense.

It is the only explanation that steers clear of the entire “One-Stage” or “Two-Stage” debate. It considers the historical context of the Jewish-Samaritan schism. It also avoids the problems associated with demanding uniformity in the experiences of all Christians. Instead, it allows for differing manifestations of the gifts and graces of the Spirit.

- **Next time:** Luke returns to the story of Simon Magus.