

May 24, 2020

# The Samaritan Pentecost



Acts 8:14-25



## Central Question

What does it mean to be baptized by the Holy Spirit?

## Scripture

Acts 8:14-25

14 Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. 15 The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. 16 (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). 17 Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. 18 Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, 19 saying, "Give me also this power so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." 20 But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God's gift with money! 21 You have no part or share in this, for your heart is not right before God. 22 Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. 23 For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and the chains of wickedness." 24 Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may happen to me." 25 Now after Peter and John had testified

and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, proclaiming the good news to many villages of the Samaritans.

## Reflecting

I remember the charismatic movement in the 1970s. This movement usually emphasized speaking in tongues as a sign that one had been baptized with the Spirit. Charismatic preachers taught that people who experienced conversion to the faith should then seek this Spirit-baptism.

The word "charismatic" comes from a Greek word that means "gift." For most charismatic Christians, speaking in tongues was and is the principal gift, but many others are mentioned in Scripture. Paul writes in some detail about this in 1 Corinthians 12-14.

The results of the charismatic movement varied. Sometimes congregations or whole denominations split over their different views. The movement also created new congregations aflame with spiritual passion and evangelistic zeal. In other cases, faith communities absorbed the movement, allowing members to participate in it as long as they didn't cause disruptions. For some individuals, experiencing the Holy Spirit in this way was a defining moment that transformed their lives. For others, the effects were dramatic but short-lived. The latter is my own family's testimony.

At any rate, because of the charismatic movement, a new interest in the Holy Spirit burst forth. Many books were written and sermons preached on the Holy Spirit and what baptism in the Spirit means.

None of us should doubt the importance of the Holy Spirit in the Christian life. The Spirit is certainly an integral part of the book of Acts. In fact, I have heard scholars say that instead of it being considered "The Acts



What dangers can arise from being dogmatic about how the Spirit

must work?

of the Apostles,” a better title would be “The Acts of the Holy Spirit.”

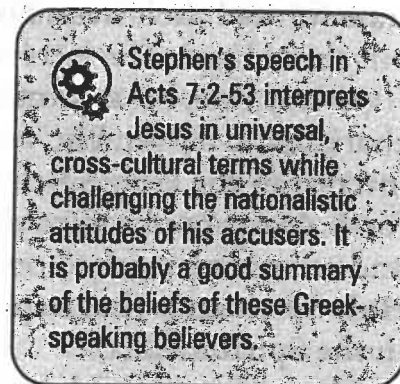
The phrase “baptism of (or in) the Holy Spirit” is not found in today’s text. Even so, the fascinating story of Samaritans converting to faith in Christ and later receiving the Spirit gives us an opportunity to examine the connection between the faith of believers, baptism in water, and God’s gift of the Holy Spirit.

### Studying

Before diving into the text, it seems important to share some context. One of the main characters in today’s story is Philip, who makes his first appearance in Acts 6. A conflict had arisen between Aramaic- and Greek-speaking followers of Jesus. Those who spoke Aramaic were Jewish believers raised in the land of Israel. Those who spoke Greek grew up mainly outside of Israel and were heavily influenced by Greek culture. Six people with Greek names were chosen to deal with the conflict. Philip was one of those; Stephen was another.

Stephen’s story is told in Acts 6–7. After Stephen was killed as a martyr for Christ, many Jewish believers in Jesus were persecuted and decided to flee Jerusalem (8:1). It is possible that most of those who fled were from the Greek-speaking group. They seemed more willing to abandon some of the traditions of Judaism than the group who spoke Aramaic.

Philip was among those who left Jerusalem for safety’s sake. Like his fellow refugees, he continued to proclaim the good news wherever he went. Overall, the Greek-speaking believers seemed more open to breaking down barriers for the sake of the gospel. Philip went to Samaria, and his story



begins in Acts 8:5. He proclaims the Messiah to the people of Samaria and performs exorcisms and healings. The people listen to him and respond with joy (v. 8).

Verses 9-13 provide a bit of background. Previously, the Samaritans were fascinated with a man named Simon, a magician. They had listened to him eagerly, just as they now listen to Philip. They said of Simon, “This man is the power of God that is called Great” (v. 10). Now, however, they believe the message of Stephen and are baptized. Simon also believes and is baptized. He follows Philip everywhere he goes, “being amazed when he saw the signs and great miracles that took place” (v. 13).

This brings us to today’s text. The apostles in Jerusalem have heard about Philip’s ministry in Samaria. Peter and John are chosen to go and see for themselves. When they get there, they discover that though the Samaritans have been baptized in the name of Jesus, they have not yet received the Holy Spirit. (Being baptized “in Jesus’ name” pointed to his authority and not necessarily to the actual words spoken during the ritual of baptism.) Peter and John lay hands on the people and pray for them, and the people receive the Spirit.

We aren’t told what demonstrated that the Samaritans had received the Spirit. There are at least three possibilities. They may have spoken in tongues, like Cornelius’s household in Acts 10:44-48. They may have been filled with overwhelming joy, like the converts on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:46-47). Finally, they may have begun to bear witness to Jesus with unbridled enthusiasm, like the church in Acts 4:31.

We also are not told why the Spirit was delayed until the apostles arrived. Maybe it was because of God’s desire that there be one church, not two communities divided by ethnicity. Jews and Samaritans were often antagonistic toward one another, so a division along ethnic lines was certainly a possibility. By waiting until the apostles came

to impart the Spirit, the church in Samaria was solidly linked to the Jewish church in Jerusalem. No matter their differences and disagreements, the Jewish and Samaritan followers of Jesus were compelled to be one church.

In verse 18, Simon reappears in the story. He sees Peter and John's amazing ability to impart the Spirit and wants it for himself. He even offers them money if they will share this ability with him. Is Simon intent on personal gain, or does he actually want to help others? It doesn't seem to matter; Peter is furious at the offer regardless of Simon's motive. In effect, he tells Simon, "You and your money can go to hell!" (Willimon, 69). He urges Simon to ask God's forgiveness for assuming that he could buy God's gifts with money. This exchange is a wonderful reminder that the Holy Spirit is a gift from God. The Spirit is freely given to us, as are all God's blessings.

Many missionaries have learned the main lesson in this story: conversion doesn't instantly erase generations of inherited beliefs and worldviews. Years ago, I heard the story of a young lady who had done something that she felt was out of alignment with her newfound Christian faith. She asked a missionary what she needed to do to make up for her sin. She asked this out of a Buddhist background, where bad deeds were erased only when good ones canceled them out. Similarly, Simon still had a lot of growing and learning to undergo before he could reach spiritual maturity.

Simon apparently repents and asks the apostles to pray for him (v. 24). History has not been kind to him, though. In the early church he is often depicted as the instigator of a number of heresies, especially Gnosticism. There is no evidence, however, that any of that is true. For all we know, he may have become an effective witness to Christ.



Simon's final legacy is indicated by the name given to the buying and selling of spiritual gifts and ecclesiastical offices—*"simony"* (Rainwater, 827).

Our text closes with Peter and John traveling back to Jerusalem. On the way, they stop in many villages to share the good news of Christ and God's kingdom. In this way, Philip's ministry in Samaria leads the Jerusalem church to reach beyond its borders for the first time. This movement breaks down another barrier when Paul, a Greek-speaking Jew like Philip, proclaims the good news to Gentiles.

### *Understanding*

Philip was a trailblazer. He went where others in the church had not yet gone, reached across barriers to share the good news of Christ and God's kingdom, and baptized those who responded in faith. In New Testament times, baptism was the sign of allegiance to Christ. It was usually a vital part of new converts' confession of faith.

Churches that practice believer's baptism risk separating the act of being baptized from the initial, transforming confession of faith in Christ. In Scripture, the two are always closely intertwined. Separating the two—either in time (being baptized weeks after accepting Christ) or in conception (viewing them as two completely separate acts)—may lead some people to think baptism is less important. But that is a mistake. Christians have always seen baptism as the principal way to be incorporated into the full life of the church, the body of Christ.

Like baptism, the Holy Spirit is a gift God has given to the church. Luke emphasizes the Spirit as the *main* gift that God gives to believers. As with all of God's gifts, the Spirit is freely given in God's timing. In Acts 8, the gift is delayed until the arrival of Peter and John. As we have seen, there was a good reason for the delay.



Have you ever questioned whether your spiritual experience is valid because it differs from what is considered "the norm"? How might this passage address your concerns?

God's normal pattern, though, is to give the Spirit at the time of our conversion. This gift is also connected to water baptism, which completes the process of conversion and initiation into the Christian life (see Jn 3:1-8; Gal 4:6). And yet the Spirit is a free gift. As with our conversion to faith in Christ and our water baptism, we "receive" this gift from God. Whatever Simon's intention may have been, Peter wanted him to understand the nature of the Spirit's presence as a gift. We need to understand this as well. Our encounters with the Holy Spirit may not be as dramatic as the ones recorded in the Bible, but we can be sure that God is always at work through this great gift.

### *What About Me?*

- *We are often ignorant of barriers to our witness.* The church in Jerusalem may not have considered preaching to Samaritans. In their desire to share the good news, maybe they never thought the Samaritans might want to hear it. Through the Spirit's guidance, Philip changed all of that. Are there people that you have never thought about in terms of sharing your witness? Ask the Spirit to open your eyes and your heart.
- *We aren't always aware of the Spirit's presence.* The principle of "out of sight, out of mind" is an apt description of our problem. We can't see the Spirit any more than we can see the wind, and yet Scripture promises that the Spirit is there. Spend time in prayer offering thanks for the Spirit's presence in you and with you.
- *God has given us the Spirit.* And the Spirit gives us the gifts we need for a full and meaningful Christian life. Are you lacking something that you desire for the sake of Christ? Perhaps it is joy or courage or maybe love for those who can seem unlovable. Think about your own life and what you

need to be more like Christ. Pray for the Spirit to give you what you need to serve and glorify God.

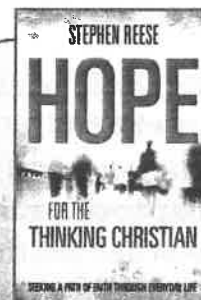
- *We all bring our culture into our Christian experience.* Can you think of elements of your culture that may be incompatible with Christian faith? Maybe there are aspects of your worldview that contradict the revelation of God in Christ. Remember that, for many centuries, European Christians believed that God approved of slavery. Pray for the Spirit to open your eyes to the truth regardless of cultural preconceptions. Remember the promise of Jesus: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13).

### Resources

Robert Rainwater, "Simon Magus"; James F. Strange, "Samaritans," in *The Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Watson E. Mills et al. (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1990).

Robert W. Wall, "The Acts of the Apostles: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 10 (Nashville TN: Abingdon, 2002).

William H. Willimon, *Acts, Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988).



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