

In the account of the Samaritan conversions we have the only record in the New Testament of persons who believed, accepted Christian baptism, and had nevertheless not yet received the Holy Spirit. The reason for this hiatus is as important for us to grasp as it was for the nascent church in Jerusalem.

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit; for it had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit (8:14-17).

It should be noticed first that the remedy for the absence of the Holy Spirit was not sought or found, according to this text, in any disposition or action of the Samaritans. Nor according to our text are any steps for receiving the Holy Spirit proposed to the Samaritans. The Samaritans are asked no questions and they are placed under no commands. The problem lies not with the Samaritans. We have no record that it lay with Philip, who in fact in the next scene (8:26-40) is instrumental in the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch without any supplementation by the apostles. Indeed, we have no record of subjective lack on the part of any party in this account. The discovery in Acts 8:14-17 of insufficient commitment on the part of any parties or a finding of the imperfect fulfilling of any conditions must be imported into the text, they cannot be exported from it.

Observe the importations of the Pentecostal Riggs (p. 109):

Peter had told the Sanhedrin that the Holy Ghost was given to them that obey God (Acts 5:32) and so he doubtlessly explained this to the Samaritan converts. Peter and John both had heard the Lord promise that the Father would give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him. So they surely told this, too, to the Samaritan converts. When these awaiting new disciples were thus prayed for and instructed, the apostles laid hands on them (as an aid to the seekers' faith) and they received the Holy Ghost.

However, the imposition of the apostles' hands was not simply an aid to the seekers' faith, it was the normal accompaniment of baptism (9:17-19; 19:5-6; Heb. 6:2), i.e., of initiation, and *as such*, not as either an independent initiation rite or as an intensifier of the initiates' faith, it has its significance.

What the Samaritans lacked, as far as we are told, was not the laying on of hands, it was the *Holy Spirit* (vv. 15~16). In no other place in Acts, except at Acts 19:6, are the hands of apostles recorded in connection with the gift of the Holy Spirit — neither at Pentecost, nor in the post-Pentecost accessions, nor even in Paul's conversion itself where Ananias, who was not an apostle, was, according to Luke's account, the agent (or audience) of Paul's initiation. Even in Acts 19:1-7 it was not the apostolic laying on of hands which was either missing or taught but, as a careful reading of the text will reveal, the desideratum was Christian baptism of which the laying on of hands was simply, as always, a part.

We must look for the solution to the Samaritan puzzle in another direction. Samaria was the church's first decisive step out of and beyond Judaism. This was no casual event. Only the accession of the Gentiles (ch. 10) can be compared with it. Samaria was both a bridge to be crossed and a base to be occupied. A bridge to be crossed because Samaria represented the deepest of clefts: the racial-religious. A base to be occupied because the church no longer resides in Jerusalem or among Jews alone, but becomes a mission.

We know from other accounts in the New Testament of the feeling of the Jew for the Samaritan, and we know from the important records in Acts 10-11 and 15 of the painful and

critical decision which the reception of Gentiles posed for the Jewish church. The reason behind the absolutely unique division of what everywhere else since Pentecost is one — Christian baptism and the gift of the Spirit — may most satisfactorily be found in the divine will to establish unequivocally for the apostles, for the despised Samaritans, and for the whole church present and future that for *God* no barriers existed for his gift of the Spirit; that wherever faith in the gospel occurred, there was the *work* of God's Spirit and there accordingly God purposed to give the gift of his Spirit; that baptism in the name of Christ as everywhere else now even in Samaria must include the gift of the Spirit; in a word, that the gift of God's Holy Spirit was free and for all. To teach this basic and important fact — it was the fact of the gospel — God withheld his gift until the apostles should see with their own eyes and —let it not be overlooked — be instrumental with their own hands in the impartation of the gift *of God* (v. 20), merited by nothing, least of all by race or prior religion.

The role of the apostles should not be minimized. As the sole witnesses of the ministry, death, and above all of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and as the specially appointed bearers of this saving tradition to the world, they were dominically invested with authority and it is no accident therefore that it was they and not simply any disciples in Jerusalem who were sent to Samaria. Later, less august officers than Peter and John can be dispatched to important new situations — e.g., Barnabas to Antioch (11:22). But in the crossing of the *first* threshold into the non-Jewish world, as Luke wishes dramatically and stylistically to present it, the leading apostles themselves came.

The fact that God willed to connect with the apostles' coming, prayer, and laying on of hands his gift of the Holy Spirit heightens not only the significance in the divine economy of the apostles but of the church and of its apostolic foundations. It was evidently not the divine plan, according to Luke's understanding, that the first church outside Jerusalem should arise entirely without apostolic contact. For this to have occurred could have indicated the indifference of the apostolic tradition — viz., of the history of Jesus Christ — and of the unity of the church. Both the tradition and the union were preserved through the apostolic visitation. The Samaritans were not left to become an isolated sect with no bonds of union with the apostolic church in Jerusalem. If a Samaritan church and a Jewish church had arisen independently, side by side, without the dramatic removal of the ancient and bitter barriers of prejudice between the two, particularly at the level of ultimate authority, the young church of God would have been in schism from the inception of its mission. The drama of the Samaritan affair in Acts 8 included among its purposes the vivid and visual dismantling of the wall of enmity between Jew and Samaritan and the preservation of the precious unity of the church of God through the unique divine "interception" and then prompt presentation of the Spirit in the presence of the apostles.

The centrality of the apostles and the unity of the church — these are among the important lessons of Acts 8 — but they are overarched by that for which both the apostles and the one apostolic church existed. The gospel, in its grace, freedom, and universality, constitutes the major *scopus* of the Samaritan incident. The illumination before the eyes of the whole church — Jewish, Samaritan, and thereafter ecumenical — of the free gospel of Jesus Christ which is sealed to all those who receive it by the free gift of the Holy Spirit: this is the dominant purpose not only for the writing of the Samaritan record, but for the writing of Acts 1-15 as a whole.

[*A Theology of the Holy Spirit* by Frederick Dale Bruner: Eerdmans, 1977, pp. 173-177]