

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (7-8-94 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Philip, and the believers at Samaria

Acts 8:1-25

Introduction

As persecution grew, early Christians moved out of Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria. Philip went to the city of Samaria (probably the capital city), now called Nablus, and he preached there. There were many miracles and conversions. The story of Simon the sorcerer will be dealt with another time.

Peter and John came from Jerusalem, and laid hands on Samaritan believers. As a result they received the Holy Spirit because they had not received Him at the time of their conversion and baptism. This is an extremely difficult and controversial passage, raising the question, are there two stages in the Christian experience, or was the Samaritan situation an exception because of special circumstances?

Roman Catholics and Charismatics argue for the two stages, though their experiences are quite different. The mass of evangelical opinion is that there is one stage in Christian experience, i.e. we receive the Holy Spirit at conversion, and the case of the Samaritans was an exception.

We are going to look first of all at the background, then at Philip and his message, and finally the reasons for the Samaritan's special experience.

Background to the story

It is essential to grasp the significance of what happened in the story. We are aware from the New Testament that there was a bad relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans. **Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans** (John 4:9). Jews despised the Samaritans as half-breeds and half-casts, semi-Gentiles. Bitterness had gone on for hundreds of years.

It began when the Kingdom was broken up after Solomon's time. The ten defeated tribes made Samaria their capital, and the two tribes loyal to the south kingdom of Judea made Jerusalem their capital. There was constant warfare between the two. Then Israel was conquered by Assyria in 722 BC. There was mass deportation, and repopulation by foreigners, hence they were deemed half-breeds through intermarriage. Jews went into exile in Babylon in 566 BC. On their return, they rebuilt the Temple, refusing the help of the Samaritans. The Samaritans had their own Temple in the 4th century BC, on Mount Gerazim. They held only the Pentateuch to be the Bible. So the Jews held the Samaritans to be heretics in belief and schismatics, who had departed from the true religion of the Jews.

The bitterness continued in New Testament times. James and John wanted to call down fire because the Samaritans did not welcome Jesus (Luke 9:54). Luke shows them in good light, as in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25ff). He records that the one leper out of the ten, who returned to thank Jesus, was a Samaritan

(Luke 17:11ff). The Lord Himself had sympathy and compassion on Samaritans, which most Jews lacked.

We can see from this background what an enormous step needed to be taken if the divide between Jew and Samaritan was to be crossed and they were to hear the Gospel.

Philip – the man and his message

Philip is the key man in this situation and in the step forward to taking the Gospel to the despised half-breed heretics. In the providence of God, he was well prepared. He was one of the seven “deacons” appointed with Stephen to care for the widows who claimed they were neglected in the daily distribution of food and money. He was a man of practical sympathy and compassion.

He was a Greek-speaking Jew, with a more open and sensitive outlook than the more rigid Aramaic-speaking cousins who had spent all their lives in Jerusalem or the surrounding area. He is described in Acts 6:3 as being full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, vital qualifications for the dangerous and difficult situation he was going into. The least false step or unwise move could have caused a major upset. Yet led by the Lord and filled with compassion for the Samaritans, he took the bold step to bring the good news to them. **Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there** (Acts 8:5). The Samaritans believed in the Messiah. They called him the Taheb, or “the Comforter”, stressed in Deuteronomy 18:15: **The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.**

So like all the other Apostles, Philip’s message was that the one prophesied to be the deliverer of God’s people had come. His name was Jesus. He had died on the Cross for sins, and had been raised to life. He is now in glory at His Father’s right hand, and will return again. Man must repent, believe and be baptised. This is what is meant when it says Philip preached **the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ** (Acts 8:12). God’s saving rule had come among men through the coming of Christ. This message was **the word of God** (Acts 8:14), God’s message, God’s Gospel.

Philip’s message then is the same message men need to here today – the Gospel of God’s saving grace. All have sinned, but **God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life** (John 3:16). Men’s need is always the same. God’s provision is just the same.

Then, as often in New Testament times, preaching was accompanied by miraculous signs, and demons were exorcized, paralytics and cripples were healed. The result was great joy in the city. Wherever the Gospel is preached and responded to, wherever God draws near to men, wherever believers obey God’s revealed truth – joy is always the result. There was joy when Christ came, joy at the resurrection, joy at the ascension, joy when the shepherd found his lost sheep (Luke 15:5ff). After Jesus spoke about abiding in Him, He said, **I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete** (John 15:11). **You will fill me with joy in your presence** (Psalm 16:11). **For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating**

and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17).

In the story of the Christian church, the times when the greatest hymns of praise and joy in the Lord were written were the times of revival. An authentic mark of the Gospel and conversion to Christ is Christian joy.

*“Come we that love the Lord,
And let our joys be known.
Join in a song with sweet accord
And thus surround the throne.”*

We are called to rejoice in the Lord – not in our circumstances – but in the Lord.

Confirmation by the Holy Spirit

Now we come to the difficulty posed by this passage. When the Apostles heard that Samaria had accepted the Word of God, they sent Peter and John. Peter and John prayed for the new believers that they might receive the Holy Spirit because He had not come among them yet. They had simply been baptised into the name of the Lord Jesus. So they laid hands on them, and then the Holy Spirit came upon them. There were obvious manifestations of the Holy Spirit on these Samaritans.

Now come the questions. Was their conversion genuine in the first place? Or had they only believed in their mind? There is no hint that their response to the Gospel was inadequate. They had paid close attention, and had accepted the Word of God. So was their conversion in two stages? And does this mean our conversion is in two stages also?

There are those who would say yes in answer to this, that there is a second stage involving “hands” and prayer. The Roman Catholics would say the first stage was baptism as an infant, when the Holy Spirit regenerates. Then later comes confirmation by the bishop, the successor of the Apostles, and by the laying on of hands, the Spirit is given. This is outward and ceremonial. At the other end of the spectrum, but also advocating a two-stage conversion, are the Pentecostals, who would say the second stage is more inward and spiritual. The first stage is conversion – repentance and faith with regeneration, the divine work of new birth. The second stage is baptism in the Spirit with laying on of hands by the Pentecostal leader, often accompanied by tongues. Therefore, they would say, not all Christians have been baptised in the Spirit.

The evangelical response is that undoubtedly the Samaritans were a special case. Theirs was a two-stage experience, but this is not normal for Christians. The general and plain teaching of the New Testament is that initiation into Christ is a single experience, involving repentance, believing, baptism, the gift of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit. After that, we grow in maturity as we are continually filled by the Holy Spirit. During that growth, we may have richer and fuller and deeper experiences of God, but this is not a second stage stereotype for all. Nor is the laying on of hands a necessary element. It is a significant gesture, strengthening assurance and accompanying prayer, but it does not actually convey the Holy Spirit. All Christians

have the Holy Spirit, and **if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ** (Romans 8:9).

So what makes the Samaritan situation in our passage a special case? Why were two senior Apostles sent to inspect the situation, though this was not normal practice? Why had the Holy Spirit been withheld at the time when the Samaritans accepted the Word? The reason is that this was the first occasion when the Gospel was preached not only outside Jerusalem, but also inside Samaria. The Samaritans were a halfway house between the Jews and the Gentiles. It marked the beginning of non-Jews entering the Church. The Samaritans had had no links with the Jews for centuries. Would the rift continue now there were Jewish Christians and Samaritan Christians? The Samaritans had welcomed the Gospel, but would the Jews welcome the Samaritans? Or would there be two factions in the Christ of Christ? Would there be a new and separate Samaritan church, and therefore the body of Christ torn apart?

Therefore the Apostles came down to investigate, endorsing Philip's bold plan of evangelising the Samaritans. They prayed for the converts, and laid hands on them as a sign of solidarity and fellowship. It was a public sign to the whole church that Samaritans were bone fide Christians, who had entered into the redeemed community on the same terms of entry as the Jewish Christians. The Holy Spirit came on them as God's endorsement, bringing them into the body of Christ, and making them one with the Jewish Christians. The Spirit brought them into the fellowship of the whole church. They and the Jews needed to realize that. They found Christ, and they found one another. One Body of Christ, united by One Spirit.

This is the only explanation which sees the historical context and is consistent with the rest of the New Testament. Therefore there is no Biblical warrant for two stage experience for all Christians. The visit of Peter and John was exceptional. There are no parallels today. Today we receive forgiveness and the Spirit the moment we believe. We need more and more of His power. At the same time we recognise oneness with all who believe in the Lord and who have received the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

This is another example of the power of the Gospel. We see it in the way God prepared and gifted a man like Philip. We see the relevance of the Gospel to all men. We see the power of the Gospel to unite those who were deadly enemies for generations and make them one in Christ.

A renewing of our confidence in power of the Gospel is urgently needed. Above all, we see the power of the Gospel to bring reconciliation between God and man, and to prepare men for eternity. This is so relevant in the midst of this world's ills - division, strife on grounds of race, nation and religion. **There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus** (Galatians 3:28).

Practical note – **Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace** (Ephesians 4:3).