

We are working our way through the book of Acts which tells the story of the growth and spread of the church of Jesus Christ after Jesus had ascended into heaven and poured out the Holy Spirit. Luke is the author and as he tells the story of the growth and spread of the early church he makes certain points along the way. His interest in telling the story is not simply to preserve history, but to instruct and to edify. In the section that we are going to look at this afternoon/evening, there are two matters that Luke draws to our attention. He tells the story of Simon the Magician as a warning to his readers that there is a kind of believing that falls short of true saving faith. And in the middle of the story of Simon the Magician he relates how the Samaritans who believed in Jesus did not receive the Holy Spirit until two of the apostles from Jerusalem came and laid their hands on them. This raises the very important question of how and when believers receive the Holy Spirit.

First we consider the story of Simon the Magician. Earlier in the chapter we have been told that Philip came to Samaria and preached the gospel there. Then beginning in verse 9 we are introduced to a man named Simon who was a prominent religious figure in Samaria. “But there was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, ‘This man is the power of God that is called Great. And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic.’”

The magic that Simon practiced was not the kind of magic where someone performs tricks using certain techniques that have nothing to do with the supernatural. The magic that Simon practiced was associated with evil spirits. Simon practiced sorcery. One definition of sorcery is “the use of power gained from the assistance or control of evil spirits....” So Simon was able to do things that amazed people by the power of evil spirits.

This kind of interaction with evil spirits was forbidden in the OT. In Deuteronomy 18:9-14 God forbids his people from what he calls “the abominable practices of [the] nations” and mentions things like divination, telling fortunes, and sorcery. One of the reasons that Luke includes this story in his account of the early church is to make a clear distinction between the signs and wonders that Philip was doing by the power of the Holy Spirit and the amazing things that people like Simon were able to do by the power of evil spirits. This was also an issue with Jesus’ miracles where the gospel writers make a clear distinction between Jesus’s miracles and the things that were done by demonic power.

And certainly Luke is warning his readers here to stay clear of any kind of involvement with occult practices. They were common in the time the NT was written and they are still common today with fortune telling and witchcraft and the like. All of that is a “no-go-zone” for followers of Jesus. There is a real world of evil spirits. They are enemies of God and his people. And we are warned to stay clear.

There is another interesting contrast between Simon and Philip here that is instructive for us. Notice that Simon claimed greatness by his magic and the people treated him as some great person – even as having some connection to the divine. Simon presented himself as great and the people said, “This man is the power of God that is called Great.”

Notice how Philip is described in verse 12, “[He] preached the good news about the kingdom and the name of Jesus Christ.” And in the preceding paragraph we are told that Philip “proclaimed to them the Christ. And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and the signs that he did.” Philip is not calling attention to himself. He is pointing to Christ. He is preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. The signs and wonders that he did authenticated the message that Philip brought and there is no hint of Philip using them to draw attention to himself.

Simon the sorcerer drew attention to himself. Philip the evangelist pointed away from himself to Jesus and the kingdom of God. Those who are indwelt by evil spirits want to be thought of as great. Those who are indwelt by the Spirit of God want people to see Jesus as great. Listen to how Paul speaks of the ungodly in 2 Timothy 3:2, “For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant....” And Philippians 2:3 “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.” And one of the most beautiful examples of the Christian way – John the Baptist who said concerning Jesus and himself – “He must increase, but I must decrease.” (John 3:30)

This is the Christian way. That does not mean that we embody it as we should, but it is the ideal for which we reach. As Paul puts it in Galatians 6:14, “[Be] it far from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ....” And 1 Corinthians 1:31, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” In the contrast between Simon the sorcerer and Philip the evangelist we see the difference between the spirit of evil and the spirit of God.

So then Philip was preaching the “good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ” and we are told “they believed Philip ... [and] were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip.” (Verses 12-13)

So there was fruit on Philip’s preaching. People believed and they were baptized. Presumably Philip baptized them after being assured that their faith was credible. We do not know any details about the conversations that Philip had with the people he baptized. But if we take into account Peter’s call to a response at the end of his sermon on the day of Pentecost, we can be certain that there was some expression of faith in Jesus and repentance for sin. Remember how Peter had said, “Repent and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and you will receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit.” And 2:41 says, “So those who received his word were baptized....”

If we consider the description of the people of Samaria, including Simon, who believed Philip’s preaching of Jesus and were baptized, in the light of other examples in the book of Acts of people believing and repenting and being baptized, we can assume that there must have been some kind of confession of faith in Jesus and some commitment to repent of sin and submit to the Lordship of Christ. The phrase that we use for this in the reformed tradition is a credible confession of faith. When the elders examine someone for membership in the church what they are looking for is a credible confession of faith – a confession of faith in Jesus Christ that appears to be genuine. Elders cannot see into the hearts of those who apply for church membership and the

phrase “credible profession of faith” makes that point. People are accepted into church membership if they profess faith in Jesus Christ and make a commitment to live a life of obedience to Christ that appears to be genuine – that is not contradicted by a sinful way of life or by serious ignorance about the gospel message.

There was something like that here in our text when some of the people of Samaria believed Philip’s preaching of Christ and were baptized. And Simon was among that number. He professed his faith in Jesus and Philip had no reason to doubt his profession and so baptized Simon. But from the rest of the story we know that Simon’s faith was not true saving faith.

When Peter and John came from Jerusalem and prayed that the believers in Samaria would receive the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit was given in connection with the apostle’s laying their hands on the people, Simon offered them money if they could give him the same power. Verses 18-19 say, “Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money, saying, ‘Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay by hands may receive the Holy Spirit.’”

In response to that request Peter said, “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours and pray to the Lord, that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.”

So Peter was able to discern that Simon’s faith was not true saving faith – his heart was not right before God. Perhaps he discerned that simply on the basis of Simon’s attempt to buy the power of giving the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands, or perhaps God gave Peter a supernatural insight into Simon’s heart – but however it happened, Peter knew that Simon was not right before God even though he had professed faith in Jesus and been baptized.

The example of Simon here is a very important warning for us. It is possible to profess faith in Jesus Christ and be received into membership in the church of Christ and not possess genuine saving faith. This is a sobering and very important part of the biblical teaching. Not everyone who professes to believe in Jesus Christ is truly saved. We see something similar in John 2:23-25, which says that “[Many] believed in [Jesus’] name when he saw the signs that he was doing.” But adds this: “But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.”

This is a sobering possibility. There is a kind of believing in Jesus that falls short of true saving faith. And what it means for us is that we need to follow the biblical instruction concerning how to have a well-founded assurance of faith. Paul speaks of this in 2 Corinthians 13:5 where he writes, “Examine yourselves, to see

whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? – unless indeed you fail to meet the test!”

The test that is mentioned most often in the Bible is sincere obedience to God’s law – not perfect obedience since that is impossible for us, but sincere obedience which is not only possible but inevitable in all who have received the Holy Spirit. Jesus makes this point in Matthew 7:21 where he says, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” Those who say, “Lord, Lord” are those who profess to submit to Jesus as Lord, but Jesus is insisting that along with the profession there must also be the reality of doing the will of God.

Peter has a helpful instruction on this point in the first chapter of his second epistle. In verses 5-7 he writes, “For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.” And then he says in verse 10, “Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall.”

It is very important to get this straight. We are not saved by our obedience. We are saved by trusting in Jesus. Salvation is a gift of grace and we do nothing to earn it. We come to Jesus as sinners looking to him alone to be reconciled to God. This is a wonderful and glorious truth. It is expressed beautifully and clearly in verses 2 & 3 of the hymn, “Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me.” “Not the labors of my hands can fulfill thy law’s demands;/ could my zeal no respite know, could my tears for ever flow,/ all for sin could not atone; thou must save, and thou alone. 3 Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling; /naked, come to thee for dress; helpless, look to thee for grace;/ foul, I to the Fountain fly; wash me, Savior, or I die.”

And this is an important part of a well-founded assurance of salvation. We are invited to come to Christ as we are and freely receive forgiveness of our sins and reconciliation with God. We will never have confidence in our salvation if we do not understand this truth clearly.

However, once we have trusted in Christ, there will always be the fruit of obedience if our faith is genuine saving faith. We are not saved by our obedience, but we are saved unto obedience. This does not mean perfect obedience. We will not be completely free from sin until we are in glory. But we will be serious about obedience. We will be serious about living to please God. We will be serious about fighting against sin in our lives. This point receives a great deal of emphasis in the NT. 1 John 3:10 says, “By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.”

So getting back to Simon – he is a warning for us that it is possible to believe and be baptized while still being in an unsaved condition. Not all faith is saving faith. One of the evidences that Simon was not a saved person

was his offer to buy the gift of giving the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands. He was still the same man that he was before he had heard Philip preach. He wanted to use the power of the Holy Spirit in the same way that he had used the power of evil spirits. He wanted to use God rather than being used by God. His heart was not right before God. He had not received that inner transformation that accompanies saving faith.

Now we do not know whether Simon later on came to true saving faith. Peter does call him to repentance and Simon does ask Peter, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me." That is not clear evidence of saving faith, but it is not a bad response to what Peter had said to him. In the end we do not know whether Simon was eventually saved or not. Luke does not answer that question for us. But what Luke does show us is that it is possible for people to believe in Jesus in some sense and be received into the church without having true saving faith and that means that we must be serious about testing ourselves in the light of God's word whether there is evidence in our experience and in our lives of the renewal of life that is always there when there is true saving faith.

So we come to the second matter that these verses bring to our attention and that has to do with how the Holy Spirit was received by the believers in Samaria. Some of the people who heard Philip preaching the "good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ" believed and were baptized. And yet we are told that they had not received the Holy Spirit. Verses 14-17 describe the situation. "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 he 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."

Now this is unusual in the light of the way the rest of the NT speaks about the Holy Spirit and his role in salvation. This text does not question the faith of anyone other than Simon. We can be sure that at least some of the people who believed and were baptized had true saving faith. And yet the rest of the NT teaches that there can be no saving faith apart from the Holy Spirit. For instance, Paul in Romans 8:9 says, "Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him." There is also Jesus' teaching about the necessity of the being born again by the Holy Spirit in John 3. In John 3:5, Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." We are born again by the Holy Spirit and Jesus' teaching in this passage makes it clear that those who are not born again by the Holy Spirit cannot enter the kingdom of God.

What this means is that there is no true saving faith apart from the Holy Spirit. And that means that at least some of the people who believed in Jesus as a response to Philip's preaching had received the Holy Spirit in some sense because there is no true faith apart from the work of the Holy Spirit. Then they received the Holy Spirit to a greater degree when Peter and John prayed and laid their hands on them. In the light of the biblical teaching about the role of the Holy Spirit in salvation, we must conclude that in this case the Holy Spirit was

given in two stages – first in connection with their believing the gospel and then to a greater degree through the prayer and laying on of hands of the apostles.

Now there are some branches of the Christian church that teach that this is a pattern that can still happen today. According to those who teach this, there are two levels of Christians, those who have not experienced the second endowment of the Holy Spirit and those who have. This is taught in the Pentecostal and charismatic tradition, although there are many differences among Pentecostal or charismatic churches and there may be some of no longer teach this theology of the second blessing.

But that is not the correct way to interpret this passage. It is a mistake to teach that this passage describes the way the Holy Spirit is given to believers beyond these instances described in Luke account of the spread of the early church. This was a unique period in the history of the church and not everything that is described in the book of Acts is intended to describe life in the church after the initial spread of the church. What we are seeing here in Acts 8 is a continuation of Pentecost as the gospel moved into a new area. It is highly significant that this section of Acts describes the gospel spreading to Samaria. That was one of the places that Jesus especially mentioned in chapter 1 where he told his disciples that they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and in Samaria and to the end of the earth.” The gospel coming to Samaria was a significant milestone in the fulfillment of Jesus’ mandate to his disciples.

And as such it was appropriate that Jesus would pour out his spirit in this dramatic two stage way which made the point in a dramatic way that what was happening in Samaria was a continuation of what had happened in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit had been poured out. This was especially important because the Samaritans were not Jews. They had Jewish blood in them, but they were a mixed race and generally looked down on by the Jews and so by having the Holy Spirit poured out in two stages similar to Pentecost, Jesus was making the point in dramatic way that the Holy Spirit was poured out upon Samaritan believers as he had been poured out on Jewish believers in Jerusalem.

For us there are not two stages in receiving the Holy Spirit. We receive the Holy Spirit when we are born again and while we can and should pray that the Holy Spirit will strengthen us and help us to grow in zeal and obedience, we are not to expect something that is fundamentally different from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit at the beginning of the Christian life. There are not two kinds of Christians – those who have received enough of him to believe and others who have received the second blessing so that they are able to live the victorious Christian life.

I want to close by reiterating the point that the first thing that happens to us when God is saving us is that we are brought from death to life by the Holy Spirit. I already quoted Jesus from John 3:5, “Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” Being born of the Spirit is the beginning of spiritual life and before that we are spiritually dead. The first part of Ephesians 2 makes this point the most clearly without referring explicitly to the Holy Spirit. Verse 1 of Ephesians 2 says that before

salvation the Ephesians were dead in trespasses and sins. That is what we all are outside of salvation. We are dead in sin. We are spiritually dead. Verse 5 of Ephesians 2 describes how the Ephesians were brought from death to life. “[Even] when we were dead in our trespasses [God] made us alive together with Christ....” That is the beginning of spiritual life. We are brought from death to life by the Spirit of God. That life enables us to believe. It also enables us to live the Christian life. We are not to await a second blessing. We are to engage in the life of repentance and obedience by the power of the Spirit – who lives in every single true believer.

That is why Paul writes in Galatians 5:16, “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.” Later he says in verse 15, “If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.”

The message for us when we see the believers in Samaria receiving the Holy Spirit as a separate stage is that we receive him all at once when we are born again – when we are brought from death to life. And the Christian life is lived in the power of the Holy Spirit. By receiving the Holy Spirit we are given all that we need for life and godliness. And the exhortations in the NT to self-control and love and joy and service are given on the basis of the enabling grace of the Holy Spirit that is given to each believer.

And so the message for us concerning the Holy Spirit is not to seek a second blessing, but to live by the power of the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

“If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.”