

Holy Spirit, Church, and the Outsiders: A Brief Study of the Relation between Baptism and Holy Spirit in Acts 8:14–17

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Abstract: The church of God always suffers with the difficulties of reaching out to people who are different, as well as with divisions within. The New Testament gives some examples of these problems, but also witnesses to God’s actions to overcome them. In Acts 8:14–17, we see how God intervened in the long history of animosity between Jews and Samaritans, sending His Spirit to welcome outsiders and to create an undivided church.

Introduction

Two weeks ago, I was in Brazil and had a conversation with some relatives about Acts 6. As we discussed the needs of the early church, someone asked the question and made the following comment, “How is it that the church was prioritizing the Hebrew widows over the Hellenist widows? Good thing that doesn’t happen today!” I replied that something very similar does happen today, in their own congregation (where I used to congregate). Some of these relatives of mine are often complaining about how only a couple of families make all the decisions in the church; whenever someone new tries to be involved in decision making, they hear: “Sorry, but we founded this church before you were even a Lutheran.” Or, “It’s best if we do things this way, because otherwise we will lose our identity.” I told them that whenever this happens, they were experiencing the same problems described in Acts 6.

That kind of division in the church is not only present in Brazilian Lutheranism. A recent episode in the Free Evangelical Lutheran Synod in South Africa (FELSISA) also reminds us of the disunity among Christians. In 2010, the FELSISA held its first synodical convention in English instead of German. That fact was welcomed by most congregations in the church body because it allowed more people to be represented at the convention. On the other hand, the German-speaking congregations “felt threatened by a loss of (cultural) identity.”¹ The ensuing controversy led to “a survey whether enough support could be gauged to form a ‘German district,’ possibly even leading to parallel Synods along cultural and language lines.”² Despite all the good

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reasons for such an attempt, the question still remained: “Was the idea of forming separate synods possibly (amongst certain members at least) still rooted (on a subconscious level) on [sic] racial discrimination that could threaten the unity of the church[?]”³

Again, that kind of division is not peculiar to Brazilian Christians or to South African Christians; it is not even a peculiarity of recent times. The Bible tells us of similar conflicts within the early church, such as the one in Acts 6 alluded to in the first paragraph and the well-known discussion between Paul and Peter in Galatians 2:11–14 over the hypocrisy of the Jewish Christians who were withholding from table fellowship with the Gentile Christians. In this paper, I will discuss the *resolution* of a conflict like those, which is recorded in Acts 8:14–17, first focusing on some exegetical aspects of these verses that make this passage stand out in the New Testament. Next, I will offer some remarks about the flow of the narrative—how a key aspect of our passage is connected to the larger context. Then, I will discuss how God works through strange means to undo divisions in the church.

Acts 8:14–17—Are the Samaritans Really Welcomed into the Church?

Acts 8 begins with the persecution of the church. In this persecution, “they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles” (8:1). “Those who were scattered went about preaching the word” (8:4). Among those was one of the seven men full of the Holy Spirit chosen in chapter 6 to help “serving tables”: Philip. Philip “went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ” (8:5). The text says that everyone was accepting the word he brought and were baptized. When the church in Jerusalem heard about the acceptance of the Samaritans, they sent Peter and John to Samaria. It is to their arrival, in 8:14–17, that we now turn.

14 Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, 15 who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, 16 for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 17 Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.

A quick and inattentive reading of this text may lead one to rushed conclusions. There are those, for instance, who affirm that verse 17 is talking about a second baptism—the baptism in the Holy Spirit, whereas verse 16 talks about the first baptism, connected to conversion, performed in the name of Jesus Christ. Another conclusion may be that the Holy Spirit was granted *because of* the imposition of hands by the apostles.⁴

Whatever verses 14–17 mean, Luke’s description of the Samaritans’ reaction to Philip’s preaching is noteworthy. He says that they *paid attention* (8:6), there was

much joy (8:8), they *believed* and *were baptized* (8:12). By this description, the Samaritans have already been converted to Jesus. According to Paul, in Romans 8:9, the Holy Spirit dwells in all believers, and if someone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. At least for those who have read Romans, it is practically impossible to imagine a church that consists of baptized believers whose members have not yet received the Holy Spirit.

Beasley-Murray⁵ analyzes our passage in light of Paul's verse mentioned above and of Luke's description of the eunuch in Acts 8:39. In the latter, after having been baptized, the eunuch goes on his way *rejoicing*. The term employed to describe that recent convert is χαίρων. In our text, with the expression πολλή χαρά (*grande júbilo*), Luke means a similar *rejoicing* of the Samaritans upon their conversion. Based on this and on Romans 8:9, Beasley-Murray concludes that those Samaritans already had the Spirit but lacked the spiritual gifts that characterized the Christian communities.⁶ This interpretation may be supported by the fact that in 8:18 Simon can *see* that the Spirit was bestowed. In fact, others⁷ also have suggested that the bestowal of the Spirit in verse 17 was manifested in glossolalia or something similar to that in effect.

We do not dismiss the *possibility* that the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the Samaritans may have been manifested through χάρισμα, but let us take the text at face value for now. Luke says that the Spirit “*had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus*” (8:16). Bruner⁸ calls our attention to two aspects that help us elucidate this passage without having to qualify verse 17 as a second and distinct coming of the Spirit. He says that the words οὐδέπω (*not yet*) and μόνον (*only*) betray Luke's surprise with the situation. The *normal* would be for the Samaritans to receive the Spirit when they were baptized, but they had *only* been baptized; the Holy Spirit had *not yet* fallen on them. Because of Luke's wonder, Bruner concludes:

With the formal “not yet” and “only” of Acts 8:16 we are led not only into the heart of the meaning of this passage but into the inner world of the writer's and the early church's conviction *vis-à-vis* baptism and the gift of the Spirit.

The qualifications of Acts 8:16 indicating temporary suspension of the normal—the “only baptized” and the “not yet” given Spirit—are, we should note, singular in the Book of Acts and they *presuppose* the union of baptism and the Spirit. In no other place in the New Testament is Christian baptism given the qualifications of Acts 8:16. And promptly in Acts 8:17 we are informed that the singular disconnection was immediately bridged.⁹

Therefore, we can conclude that the delay of the Holy Spirit in Acts 8 does not teach that water baptism and bestowal of the Spirit are necessarily separated events. What happened in our passage is an exception to the rule, for it is the only time in the

NT that baptism occurs without the bestowal of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰ That exception was immediately undone by the apostles.

You will be my witnesses

In the beginning of Acts, before His ascension, Jesus appeared to the apostles and gave them some instructions. These instructions, recorded in Acts 1:4–8, have to do with the fulfilling of the promise of the Father to send the Holy Spirit. In verse 4, Jesus tells the disciples to stay in Jerusalem until the promised is fulfilled, and He reminds them of the promise in verse 5: “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” In 1:8 Jesus explains the goal of their baptism with the Spirit: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Jesus says that the Spirit would give them δύναμιν so that they would become witnesses of Christ in different places and to different peoples. This is spoken to the apostles.

At Pentecost, God’s promise is fulfilled, according to Acts 2. The Holy Spirit grants the apostles power to speak in other languages so that they were able to witness Christ, beginning in Jerusalem. After that, the church kept growing, but it remained in Jerusalem. It seems as if the apostles did not attend to the words of Jesus: *you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*

Nevertheless, God provided a way for the witnessing to come to other regions. “The first preaching to ‘all Judea and Samaria’ takes place after the death of Stephen, by Christians ‘scattered throughout the territories of Judea and Samaria.’”¹¹ God wanted to take the church to others, rather than waiting for the others to come where the church was. However, something was not according to the plan: the apostles are explicitly excluded from the group who was scattered.¹² The Lord could easily have continued with His mission without using the apostles, but He decided not to. Jesus’ words in 1:8 echo throughout the narrative: *you (the apostles) will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria.*

As we see in chapter 8, Philip, not one of the twelve, went to Samaria and gave witness to Christ. At that time, the Samaritans believed and were baptized, but God did not give them His Spirit until the apostles arrived. Again, nowhere it is said or implied that the mission depended on the twelve to be effective, but, for some reason, God was willing to keep working along the lines of 1:8.

Next, we will consider what we regard as the main reason for God’s decision to withhold His Holy Spirit.

Conflict and Resolution

The Relationship between Jews and Samaritans

The relationship between Jews and Samaritans at that time is well defined in John 4:9. They did not have a friendly relation. “Jews and Samaritans were bitter enemies, and had been for centuries.”¹³ The first cause for the divergences between the two peoples was the matter of race. In approximately 722 BC, Samaria was conquered by Assyria, and its rulers began to resettle people into it deported from Babylon, Hamat, and other places. “These foreigners brought their native customs and religions with them . . . , and, together with others brought in still later, mingled with the surviving Israelite population.”¹⁴ “From the intermingling of these captives with the Israelites left in the land came the mixed postexilic population, those to whom the name Samaritan came to apply.”¹⁵

That past was in the way of any possibility to connect. Thus, later, by the middle of the fourth century BC, “relationships between Jews and Samaritans continued to worsen.”¹⁶ It took several years of difficult relations until they finally separated. The most probable reason for that was the “fixation of the Samaritan Scriptures (the Pentateuch) in their archaizing script, which seems to have taken place at the very end of the second century B.C.”¹⁷ At that time, “the Samaritans emerged as a distinct religious sect, completely alienated from the Jews.”¹⁸ Before that, their past had been marked by years of antagonism. “In particular, the political separation of Judah and Samaria under Nehemiah, followed by the work of Ezra, had marked a step toward religious separation that would never be reversed.”¹⁹ The following is a good brief description of the situation:

Though the Samaritans accepted the Pentateuch as the law of Moses, strict Jews of the stamp of Nehemiah regarded them as aliens and enemies (which they often enough had been), and did not welcome them into the Temple community. And the Samaritans, being proud northern Israelites, could hardly acquiesce in the notion classically expressed by the Chronicler that the true Israel was the restored remnant of *Judah*, nor could they long concede that the only place where their God might legitimately be worshiped lay across provincial frontiers in Jerusalem. Such a situation must inevitably lead sooner or later to cultic separation. And so it did.²⁰

We can see that there was hostility between Jews and Samaritans in matters related to both politics and religion. On account of such animosity, the Samaritans built their own temple, in Gerizim. That temple was destroyed by the Jews in 128 BC, which helped to solidify their enmity.²¹

The historian Flavius Josephus, a Jew, also comments on the relations between Jews and Samaritans at the time of the Assyrian Empire:

And when they see the Jews in prosperity, they pretend that they are changed, and allied to them, and call them kinsmen, as though they were derived from Joseph, and had by that means an original alliance with them: but when they see them falling into a low condition, they say they are no way related to them, and that the Jews have no right to expect any kindness or marks of kindred from them, but they declare that they are sojourners, that come from other countries.²²

In the same work, Josephus tells us of the efforts spent by the Samaritans along with other peoples in trying to prevent the Jews from rebuilding their temple and the city of Jerusalem, which Cyrus had allowed them to do. We are told that the Samaritans succeeded at first, but when Cambyses, Cyrus's son, ascended to the throne, he was persuaded and ended up interrupting what the Jews were doing. The work stood still for nine years.²³

Besides the matters described above, there are also reports of constant disputes between Jews and Samaritans over who was right and who was wrong: “[W]hile those of Jerusalem said that their temple was holy, and resolved to send their sacrifices thither; but the Samaritans were resolved that they should be sent to Mount Gerizzim.”²⁴

This history marked by deep disputes between Jews and Samaritans is not something easily forgotten. For the reasons above, the Samaritans were “people considered by most Jews to be renegade Jews at best.”²⁵ Prejudice and feelings of superiority had truly impregnated the Jews, especially those in Jerusalem—the now home city of the first groups of Christians.

God's Resolution

If the church were at any time stuck in Jerusalem, this most certainly was not due to difficulties with transportation. It was convenient to live the “new” faith among the “old” people. Without going into details about whether all Christians—including the apostles—were being persecuted²⁶ or just some of them, Luke emphasizes that the apostles (πλήν τῶν ἀποστόλων), those who would be Christ's witnesses, stayed in Jerusalem. Nonetheless, that changes in 8:14, when Peter and John are sent to Samaria by the apostles to verify the work that had been done among the Samaritans. Upon their arrival, they realize that there was something missing, something incomplete, because the Spirit had not fallen on them even though they had been baptized. Because of that, Peter and John pray for them to receive the Spirit. At this point, we can better address the questions: Why had the Spirit not fallen on the Samaritans in the first place, requiring the presence of the apostles? Why did the Samaritans have to wait? Was there something wrong with the belief of the Samaritans that impeded the Spirit, or that hindered their true conversion?²⁷

A suggestion that has become popular is that the relationship between Jews and Samaritans is the key to understanding this anomaly in the relation of water baptism and Holy Spirit. In short, the Spirit was delayed so “[t]hat all could see that God received into his kingdom not only Jews but the hated and despised Samaritans too, and to reconcile these irreconcilables in Christ.”²⁸

In fact, centuries of enmity could only be undone by the hand of God Himself. If the Holy Spirit had “ordinarily” come as expected, together with the baptism of the Samaritans, the ancient rupture between the two peoples would not have been dealt with “and there would have been two churches, out of fellowship with each other.”²⁹ God was showing the Samaritans that they were, despite everything that had happened up to that point, welcomed by the Jerusalem church. In addition, God wanted to show the Jerusalem church that He was behind the Samaritans’ acceptance of the faith, and therefore the church had no choice but to welcome them as well. By having the apostles go to Samaria and by sending His Spirit through them, God was avoiding a potential “schism in the infant Church, a schism which could have slipped almost unnoticed into the Christian fellowship, as converts from the two sides of the ‘Samaritan curtain’ found Christ without finding each other.”³⁰

What happened in Samaria was God’s way of dealing with the racial and religious separation between Jews and Samaritans. He withdrew His Spirit in Acts 8 to intervene in the history of the church (and of the world) in order to heal an open wound. Beasley-Murray, accordingly, notes that

The Samaritans believers needed a divine revelation that in the receiving the Christ they had become integrated into the messianic people, rooted in ancient Israel and newly created through the redemptive action of the Messiah. [...] It is comprehensible therefore that, in the Body wherein there is neither Jew nor Greek, it specifically a Body wherein there is neither Jew nor Samaritan. The Apostolic integration of the Samaritans into the Church of the Messiah signified an effective healing of an age-long division and it was signaled with divine approval by the Spirit coming upon the estranged people, manifesting their inclusion into the Israel of God.³¹

From this perspective, even the imposition of hands by the apostles has its place as a means by which the Samaritans are reassured of their inclusion into God’s called people.³² One way or another Jesus’ purpose would be fulfilled: *you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria* . . . Persecution scattered the Christians, except the apostles, who later are compelled to send Peter and John to Samaria. With their arrival, the problem of the temporary delay of the Spirit is resolved, and their presence there also means that the Jerusalem church is on board with “this radical and unprecedented extension and new definition of the people of God, and they make it clear that new Christians of any description and in any place enter into unity and fellowship with the church at Jerusalem and do not constitute a second or subsidiary grouping.”³³

Concluding Remarks

What can we learn from Acts 8:1–17? Some Christians will answer: “We learn that the baptism with the Holy Spirit is distinct from water baptism.” The Confessional Lutheran will rightly reply: “We learn that there is only one baptism, and this text teaches that in a strange way.” Others will say: “Only the ministers can impart the Holy Spirit, not any Christian.” This passage is the locus of many baptism debates, and this is not a bad thing. However, we should also see that “[t]he point is, rather, that Luke used these episodes to defend the extension of salvation to those groups Jews considered outside of God’s promises.”³⁴ In addition, it is significant to note that “it was not the Torah-observing disciples but the Holy Spirit who initiated the mission[,]”³⁵ and it was not through one of the twelve, but through Philip.

In light of this passage, when I think about my own church body and particularly about my congregation in Brazil, this passage reminds me that God’s salvation can really reach all the ends of the earth. At the same time, “this unsettling passage is well suited for afflicting the comfortable in the pews—and in the pulpit[,]”³⁶ for there still are racial, social, and cultural barriers among our churches in Brazil.

No matter on what side of the baptism debates one is (it does matter, but not for what I am going to say next), Acts 8 may at least encourage the church to be more open to thinking out of the box, to have a heart for the mission, to seek and to understand the lost, and to interact with the culture around. It is no minor thing that the Holy Spirit empowered people to be witnesses (1:8), filled people to serve (6:5), and saved others by means of their testimony (chapter 8). In this way, although our identity as Lutherans—English, German, or Portuguese speakers—is very important, this text invites us to define our identity as in relation to the Holy Spirit, because of our baptism and because of His mission.

Endnotes

¹ Dieter Reinstorf, “A Contextual Approach to Galatians 3:26–28 from a South African Perspective” (paper presented at the *Dies Academicus Symposium at the Lutherische Theologische Hochschule, Oberursel*, Germany, November 7–9, 2013), 10.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ For the different interpretations of these verses, see Andrew Das, “Acts 8: Water, Baptism, and the Spirit.” *Concordia Journal* 19, no. 2 (April 1, 1993): 108–134, especially 108.

⁵ G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1973), 118–119.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁷ See F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles—The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1990), 222. Also, Robert H. Smith, *Concordia Commentary: Acts* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1970), 139.

⁸ F. D. Bruner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit: the Pentecostal Experience and the New Testament Witness* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1970), 177–178.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 178.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 116.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Michael Green, *Baptism: It's Purpose, Practice & Power* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1987), 131–132.

¹⁴ John Bright, *A History of Israel*. 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 276.

¹⁵ William La Sor, *Old Testament Survey: the Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), 46.

¹⁶ Bright, *A History of Israel*, 409.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 409–10.

²¹ Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 118.

²² Flavius Josephus, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1988), 265 (9.14.3).

²³ *Ibid.*, 287 (11.2.1).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 309 (12.1.1).

²⁵ D. A. Carson, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 287.

²⁶ For an exposition of the different views, see Allan Chapple, “‘Except the apostles’ (Acts 8:1b),” *Reformed Theological Review* 70, no. 2 (August 1, 2011): 107–134.

²⁷ For a defense of this position, see Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1981), 542. Also, James D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit: A Re-Examination of the New Testament Teaching on the Gift of the Spirit in Relation to Pentecostalism Today* (London: SCM, 1970), 55–72.

²⁸ Green, *Baptism: It's Purpose, Practice & Power*, 132.

²⁹ Michael Green, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1975), 167.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 168.

³¹ Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 117–118.

³² Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 221.

³³ Smith, *Acts*, 142.

³⁴ Mark Lee “An Evangelical Dialogue on Luke, Salvation, and Spirit Baptism,” *Pneuma* 26, no. 1 (September 1, 2004): 88.

³⁵ Otis Carl Edwards Jr., “The Exegesis of Acts 8:4–25 and Its Implications for Confirmation and Glossolalia: A Review Article on Haenchen’s Acts Commentary,” *Anglican Theological Review* 2, (September 1, 1973): 106.

³⁶ David A. Handy, “Acts 8:14–25,” *Interpretation* 47, no. 3 (July 1, 1993): 290.