

## INTRODUCTION

Since Pentecost Christ has been at work by his Spirit through his people using the gospel message. Philip's experience shows this. Acts 8 shows different places and different converts.

## THE GOSPEL REACHED AS FAR AS SAMARIA

After Christ rose from the dead he ordered his church to spread his message. They would be his witnesses "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Philip, one of the Seven (Acts 6:1-7), went from Jerusalem to Samaria in obedience to Christ. It was a bold move for Jews rejected Samaritans on racial, historical, and religious grounds; the feeling was mutual. But Jesus had blessed Samaritans (John 4), and he unites his people under a new identity. Philip's faith overcame great obstacles.

Christ demonstrated the truth of Philip's message by displays of divine power. Miraculous signs are clustered at critical points in the history of God's people - the Exodus, the time of Elijah, and the time of Jesus and his apostles. God was showing the Samaritans that the gospel really was for them - their age-old exclusion had ended.

The people of Samaria "attended to" Philip's message. The writer describes their response as similar to that of the crowd at Pentecost or Cornelius and his household. It was acceptance of the message in a way that set them in a new direction. They became followers of the Lord Jesus. This was a major development in the church of Christ, and the apostles Peter and John went to Samaria. They must have wanted to see this new thing. It was also important that the new Samaritans church would be united with the Jewish church and historic divisions would not be continued into the church of Christ.

## SIMON - A DOUBTFUL CONVERT

Simon was a celebrity. A writer of the second century (Justin Martyr, a native of Samaria), says he was "considered a god". He had a lot of influence.

He was astonished at the display of divine power that went with Philip's preaching. Philip's influence was as great as his, while the powers he seemed to possess were greater. Simon attached himself to the new movement and was baptised. He seemed to be converted to Christ. But it was not the message that attracted him, it was the spectacle, and the power the apostles seemed to possess - he wanted that. We should avoid emphasizing anything spectacular, for it is only the message of a crucified and risen Saviour that honours God and saves men.

Simon may have seen the gospel as a threat to his influence. He certainly saw it as an opportunity for personal gain. There was no sorrow for sin or thankfulness for what Christ has done. He offered the apostles money to share their powers with him.

God is not mocked. It is a grievous thing to treat the holy things of God as if they were ordinary things of creation. The sin of 'simony' - buying office in the church - is named after him. We may be guilty of the same thing when we come in worship with no reverence for the God we approach; or when a baptised person acts like a non-Christian. That is treating holy things as if they were of no value - as Esau did (Hebrews 12:16-17).

The apostles rebuked Simon for his sin and warned him of God's punishment. They told him to pray for forgiveness. That is the way to deal with people who show they are enemies of God and Christ.

Readers of this incident have asked why Luke says the Holy Spirit did not come on the Samaritans when they believed and were baptised - not until Peter and John laid hands on them? Some think that believing the gospel is only a matter of our thoughts but that there is a 'second blessing' when the Spirit is given. Many who think that way associate the Spirit with some spectacular activity like speaking in tongues. If we want to solve a puzzle in the Bible we must remember what else the Bible says, for it is consistent, the Holy Spirit never contradicts himself. Faith in Christ is always the result of the Spirit's work in our heart - the promise of Pentecostal blessing was that all would "know the Lord" because he would "pour my Spirit upon all flesh" (Acts 2:16-21; Hebrews 8:8-12). Baptism should be accompanied by faith, and converts to Christ should be baptised. Faith, baptism, and the Spirit are closely linked.

This was the first time people had believed in Christ and been baptised in his name outside of the Jewish community. God had seen fit to assure the Samaritans of his favour by miracles that accompanied Philip's message. He also saw fit to assure the apostles that the Samaritans' faith was genuine by an unmistakable demonstration of the Spirit at work in them - Luke gives us no details. Christ did the same at Cornelius' conversion (Acts 10:44-48), and when the gospel produced a Gentile church in Antioch (Acts 11:22-24). This incident does not tell us to expect unusual manifestations of the Spirit as a matter of course.

## THE ETHIOPIAN - A DIFFERENT KIND OF CONVERT

Philip had gone to Samaria in obedience to Christ's word. His departure was also in obedience to a message from Christ. That spirit should characterise all gospel work. In Philip's case it led to the further spread of the gospel.

The name "Ethiopia" was used then for southern Egypt and the country we call "Sudan". To Jesus' countrymen it was "the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The eunuch held a government position similar to that of finance minister. He appears to have practised the Jewish religion, and was either one of the Jewish dispersion or a proselyte.

He was as open and humble as Simon had been self-centred and proud. He had faith in the Scriptures and submitted to their teaching. He welcomed instruction from Christ's servant. When he believed the gospel he asked for baptism - an indication that his life had changed direction. Philip found him reading Isaiah 53. Jesus had applied that passage to himself (Mark 10:45; 14:24; Luke 22:37) so Philip preached Jesus to him. That should be our message.

The man had probably heard of Jesus. Now he had the explanation from Philip and from Scripture. It was enough for him, and he devoted his life to Christ.

We left Simon distressed. We leave the Ethiopia rejoicing.

## WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM ETHIOPIA?

The eunuch returned to his country. Scripture is silent about him and it. But an early writer (Irenaeus) says he told others about Christ, and there has been a church in that area ever since. God promised that his Messiah would "enlighten the Gentiles". Christ has been doing that. His Spirit will work wherever his people take his message. The rest of his church may not know.

## CONCLUSION

Some things are obvious from this record.

From Abraham's time God's prophets said the Messiah would be a blessing to all nations. Jesus told his church to publicise it everywhere. Those two things are happening. The gospel crosses social boundaries and creates a new community that takes its identity from Christ.

Jesus Christ is in charge. It is he who commanded that the gospel be proclaimed everywhere. It is he who sent the Holy Spirit of God to enable that to happen and make it effective. He sent his people to proclaim the gospel message. He demonstrated that it is true. He transformed lives through it. In order to be effective the church needs two things – a clear presentation of the message, and the work of the Holy Spirit directing his messengers and bringing the message home to the mind, conscience, and heart of those who hear it.

But we must be careful how we respond to it? Are we like Simon, who treated it as something he could use for his own benefit? Or are we like the Ethiopian, who submitted to God humbly and thankfully? If we know which of those two we are like, we can tell whether we are on the road to heaven, or the road to hell.