

One church, united in Christ

As a preacher of the Word of God, I am fully convinced of the importance of what is called expository preaching. And what that term simply means is the preaching of entire books of the Bible. We start at the beginning of a book and preach to the end. The book is preached in its historical context and in its biblical context, and each passage is preached in the context of the book to see how any passage contributes to the main themes of the book and how the book contributes to the main themes of the Bible. This allows those who listen to have a broader view and understanding of the scriptures. This system of preaching the Word avoids the situation where the preacher chooses only his favorite passages to preach his favorite themes. Having said that, there is still a downside to this way of preaching the Word of God. Every once in a while you come to a passage which is very difficult to understand, a passage which is the subject of a lot of debate, a controversial passage. You may come to a passage that you would prefer to avoid, which is not at all easy to understand. And that's kind of the case with the passage this morning in Acts 8. It is a passage that is debated a lot in the church and can confuse us if we misunderstand it.

So what exactly am I talking about? I am not talking about the impact of the gospel in Samaria. That is indisputable. Jesus is preached. The Samaritans hold fast to the Word and to Jesus who is preached in the Word. I am not talking about the miracles which serve to confirm the authority of Philip. I'm not talking about Simon the Magician either. We'll talk about him next Sunday. These things are no problem. The difficulty is in verses 14-17. There is something strange happening in these verses that we must try to understand. The Samaritans accept the Word of God, they repent and believe in Jesus. They have great joy in Jesus (v8) but verse 16 tells us that the Holy Spirit "had not yet come on any of them." The Samaritans are converted, but they do not receive the fullness of the Spirit. Certainly, it is the Spirit working in them to regenerate them, but they have not yet received the Spirit in its fullness.

The church in Jerusalem must send two great apostles in order for the Samaritans to receive the Holy Spirit. And we must ask the question: Why did the Samaritans have to wait to receive the Holy Spirit? Is this a normal experience that is shared by all Christians since or is it rather an exceptional experience, particular in the particular context of this book?

There are Christians who teach that the Holy Spirit is not received at the time of conversion. They say the Samaritans are saved, but they must wait to receive the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands from the apostles. According to them, there is a second experience that we should desire and seek, a baptism of the Holy Spirit that leads to a more advanced, deeper spiritual life. According to them, this passage describes what is normal in the Christian life of all. According to them, there are two levels of Christians, those who are simply born again and those who also received the baptism of the Holy Spirit at a later time, an experience subsequent to their conversion. And their argument and practice are based on what is happening in this chapter. The Samaritans believe. They are born again. But it is later that they receive a second blessing, a second experience.

And we want to answer the question this morning, "Why is the Holy Spirit poured out at a later time?" Why do the Samaritans have to wait for the visit of the apostles from Jerusalem before receiving the Holy Spirit? Why did God make them wait? Is it normative, that is, is it the norm for all, or is God acting that way at this time to teach something else?

And that's the whole difficulty with the book of Acts. Luke tells us about what happened 2,000 years ago during a unique period in the history of God's church and people. This book describes the acts of the apostles. There are no more apostles today so we must be very careful before we say that what the apostles did, we too must do.

The book of Acts describes a time when the gospel was first proclaimed on a large scale among the Samaritans and in the pagan world. This unprecedented expansion of the church is accompanied by manifestations of the power of the Spirit to validate the message announced by the apostles. But we don't live in the same time anymore so we can't necessarily say that what happened with the apostles will still happen to us.

Of course, there are models to follow eg: evangelism, prayer, unity in the church, the preaching of the word, a ministry of mercy, all of these things we also find elsewhere in the scriptures. These are things we see elsewhere.

But when it comes to a passage like this morning's passage, we look at the context in the redemption story, in the church history, and we also look at similar passages to see what God wants to teach us.

A context of conflict

It is difficult for us to fully understand the importance and significance of what is happening in these verses. The gospel of Jesus Christ is preached by Christians of Jewish descent. For centuries the Jews and the Samaritans have been bitter enemies. They hated each other. They despised each other. The Samaritan religion was a mixture of Judaism and idolatry (2 Kings 17.26-28). The Jewish ancestors of the Samaritans mingled with foreigners and adopted their idolatrous religion. They were considered an "unclean race" and the Jews looked down upon them. The Samaritans only recognized the first 5 books of the Old Testament and rejected Jerusalem and the Temple. They even built their own temple on Mount Garazim.

The city of Samaria became a city of refuge for the criminals of Judea (Joshua 20.7, 21.21). The Samaritans welcomed Jewish criminals who fled justice. Those who had violated Jewish law or who had been excommunicated took refuge in Samaria. We can understand that this further aggravated the hatred between the two peoples. The Jews regarded the Samaritans as the refuse of mankind. They avoided contact with them. The Samaritan woman, what does she say when Jesus asks her for water? "The Samaritan woman said to her, 'How do You who are Jewish, you ask me to drink, to me who am a Samaritan woman?' " (The Jews, indeed, have no relationship with the Samaritans.)"

And in the book of Acts, following the proclamation of the gospel to the Jewish people, the historical people of God, the first great proclamation of the gospel of Jesus takes place among the most despised people of the Jewish people, that is that is, among the Samaritans. The first great proclamation of the gospel takes place among the enemies of the people of God. It is a real earthquake in the history of the Redemption.

And it is in this context that we must try to understand the events that follow. This is a huge change for the Kingdom of God on earth, for the gospel, and for the Church of Jesus Christ. But with that there is also a huge danger.

The Samaritans accept the gospel: V6 "The crowds clung to what Philip said" V14: "the inhabitants of Samaria received the Word of God." They accept the Word, but will they be accepted by the church? And most of the commentators tell us that everything that's going on here, the visitation of the apostles, the late outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the point of it all is to ensure the unity of the church at this key point, at a time of great danger to the church. Here is a new step of enormous importance in the unfolding of God's plan for the salvation of the nations and God wants to show that the new church of Jesus Christ must imperatively be a united church.

Given the context of the conflict between the Jews and the Samaritans, will it be possible to bring them together in one church? With all the animosity between these peoples, will it be possible for these two peoples to become one people in Christ? Wouldn't it be easier to create a church for Samaritan Christians and a different church for Christians of Jewish origin. Will the body of Christ be torn in two? God's answer is clearly "no". God does not want there to be a schism in the church.

A unity affirmed.

Let's look at the events of verses 14-25 to see how God affirms the unity of the church.

First in verse 14. The church in Jerusalem hears about what is happening in Samaria. They learn that the Samaritans have received the good news. And the church in Jerusalem sends Peter and John, two of the most important apostles, the closest apostles to Jesus,

the two apostles who had been behind many of the conversions in Jerusalem. They send Peter, to whom Jesus had given the keys of the Kingdom to confirm, to establish the authenticity of the conversions in each new stage of the building of the Church of Jesus Christ. It is Peter who confirms the conversion of the Samaritans. It is Peter who also confirms the advancement of the Kingdom among the Gentiles in chapters 10 and 11. The presence of the two most important apostles, sent from Jerusalem to Samaria, is a way of confirming the authenticity of their faith, both for the church in Jerusalem and for the Samaritans.

And verse 15 tells us that Peter and John are coming, not to lead an investigation to see if the faith is solid and genuine. They don't come to check that Philip has explained the gospel well, to see if they should give some theology lessons to the Samaritans, just to be sure. No, verse 15 tells us that they come to pray "that they may receive the Holy Spirit." Verse 17: "Then Peter and John laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit". Here, the Samaritans are publicly welcomed into the church of Jesus Christ by the apostles. Their conversion and faith are publicly confirmed by the leaders of the Jerusalem church. Let there be no doubt. The salvation that came to Samaria is as authentic as the salvation that came to Jerusalem in chapter 2. By pouring out his Holy Spirit through the hands of the apostles, God gives the salvation of the Samaritans his seal of approval. Verse 25 tells us that Peter and John "returned to Jerusalem" and what would they have told the church in Jerusalem? They would have confirmed that the work of God in Samaria is indeed an authentic work of the Spirit of God. Those who were our enemies are now our brothers and sisters. In Luke 9 we read that Jesus and his disciples enter a Samaritan village but they are not well received. And it is John who turns to Jesus with his brother and says to him, "Lord, do you want us to tell the fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" John wanted the Samaritans destroyed. Now he wants them to be saved, he confirms that they have indeed been saved. And John is going to tell all this to the church in Jerusalem. In the church in Jerusalem there will be no bitterness, no suspicion. They can draw a line under the past, under the differences of the past. They will be able to welcome the Samaritans as brothers and sisters in Christ.

And while in this passage there are lessons about church unity for believers in Jerusalem, there are also lessons for new Samaritan believers. There are things that reassure the Samaritans. They received the Word as the Christians in Jerusalem received it. They received the baptism of the Spirit, doubtless accompanied by miraculous gifts. And since these things are true, they cannot be seen as second-rate Christians. Let there be no doubt, the Samaritans are indeed part of the Covenant people of God. No need for feelings of inferiority in the church. "The same baptism of the same Spirit come upon us as upon them."

I have already noted how John had to change his attitude towards the Samaritans, but Samaritan Christians also have to change their attitude. For centuries the Samaritans have rejected Jerusalem. They reject the temple. They reject two-thirds of the Old Testament. They reject the Messiah from the line of David. But with the coming of Peter and John, the leaders of the church to Jerusalem, the Samaritans are forced to change their attitude towards all of these things. They must humble themselves and accept that so far they have been wrong about a lot of things. They must accept the authority of the Jewish apostles, the Scriptures which they had rejected. They are obliged to accept what Jesus had said to his disciples in Luke 24.46 and 47: "Thus it is written that Christ would suffer, that he would rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness sins would be preached in his name to all nations **beginning with Jerusalem**". It's like God says to the Samaritans, to be part of the church of Jesus Christ, you have to change your attitude, you have to accept the things that you have rejected so far. Beliefs that were dear to you, practices of idolatry, you must abandon them and believe what you hear from the mouths of the apostles. These are the leaders that I have chosen for my church and you must submit to the leaders that I have appointed in my church. For there to be unity in the church, the Samaritans must change their attitude.

Isn't that what God asks of each of us? We are not free to say that we are Christians and then believe what we want about the person and work of Jesus. Christian faith is an historical faith, a faith based on historical facts, on a historical person, on his life, his death, his resurrection, his return and we have to accept that person, these historical facts. Christian faith is a faith in which we receive Jesus Christ, the Eternal Son of God, who died for our sin, rose for our justification. We receive him by faith as Savior from sin, as Lord in our life. Baptized by his Spirit, we submit to his word. All of this requires a change of attitude and belief on our part. We have to accept that before, we were wrong about Jesus and about ourselves. And if we are not ready to submit to the historical Jesus, as we find it in the Bible, we have no place in his church. It is not enough to see Jesus as a good man. It is not enough to see him as a prophet or as a god among other gods. It is not enough to see him as one savior among many. It is not enough to simply see him as a role model and no more than that. At the beginning of Christian life and throughout the Christian life, we submit to what the Bible says about Jesus, who he is and what he asks of us.

The Samaritans must come to terms with what they have long denied and rejected, and as they do, they are integrated into the Church of Jesus Christ, united with all who believe in Jesus.

So I am saying that this passage is not a normative passage, given to describe the experience of Christians throughout the centuries. It is an event planned by God for a unique moment in the history of the church to highlight the unity of the church. For Jewish Christians and for Samaritan Christians, these events confirm a very simple message: There is one united church. There will not be three churches: Jewish, Samaritan, and pagan. There is one church, one faith, one Christ, one Spirit, one Lord and God. God goes to great lengths to emphasize this truth, this reality, at the very beginning of the life of the Christian church. One church united in Christ.

And there are all kinds of applications we could draw on our relationship with other churches, our relationship with the Catholic Church for example, or with groups like Jehovah's Witnesses. We must always desire the unity of the church of Jesus Christ. Unity is good, but this passage shows us that unity is based on truth. We can experience unity with all who accept the truth of the Word of God, the truth about the exclusivity of the gospel, about the person and work of Jesus Christ. Those who preach another gospel, those who preach a Christ other than the Christ of the Bible, salvation other than by faith alone by grace alone in Jesus Christ alone, we have no fundamental unity with them. Unity is based on truth, based on the Word.

But for us in our assembly, let me talk about the importance of unity and how unity can be threatened? We know that Satan, our enemy, he hates unity in the church. He does everything to destroy it to explode churches.

This passage tells us that there should not be the slightest prejudice in the church, the slightest favoritism for or against a group or an individual. I have seen racial, social, political prejudices in churches. I can be prejudiced against someone who does not vote like me, who does not have the social level, who does not have the same level of education, who does not dress like me who does not have the same tastes. We can look down on people who are not like us. We can be slow to welcome people who are different. We are more comfortable with people we know who are like us. In our church there are different nationalities, different languages, but we are one church and we want to be a united church. None of the differences I just mentioned should affect the unity we have in Christ. Jesus Christ died for the rich and for the poor. He died for blacks and for whites. He died for those who left school at 14 and for those who did their doctorates. "For God so loved THE WORLD!" The blood of Jesus covers the sin of Anglophones and Francophones. By his death he redeemed people on the political right and people on the left.

Look at the people around you. We are saved by the same grace, by the same faith in the same Savior, given by the same God, brought about by the same Spirit. This passage shows us that if the huge differences between Jews and Samaritans were irrelevant in the church of Jesus Christ, how could we allow tiny differences to divide us? This passage shows us the importance God attaches to the unity of His church. May we desire this same unity and may we all act to keep it so that the world will see it and all the glory be given to the Lord Jesus Christ who unites us by his blood.