

June 22/25 Leaders' Guide

Acts 8:4-24 "A Pastoral Word to Hesitant Hearts"

1. Have you been in church settings or heard about church settings where the activity and gifts of the Holy Spirit were a source of hurt?

This is a personal reflection question to get you "into" the topic. Try and hear from everyone even if it is a "I'm not sure I've been hurt or had much experience with this".

Some of the "hurt" may simply be confusion or misunderstanding and while you wouldn't want to diminish the hurt there may be wisdom in inviting some discussion around how such things could be navigated or spoken of to not cause confusion or misunderstanding.

As telling stories could take up the whole time try and be brief – perhaps set the "pace" by telling your own story first.

Read Acts 8:4-24

2. (vs. 4-8) Samaritans and Jews hated one another so the good news of the kingdom was not being shared with Samaritans. Where do we see the activity of God in bringing the good news to the Samaritans?

When the Assyrians had conquered the northern Kingdom of Israel they had taken away the best and the brightest and moved another conquered people in. The remaining Jews intermarried with these settlers and borrowed from their faith traditions. To the Jew then the Samaritans were a half-breed nation with a syncretistic faith. There had been many hostilities, chief among them - at least from a Jewish perspective - was that the Samaritans had blocked the rebuilding of the temple. The Samaritans built their own temple which the Jews destroyed. In response the Samaritans went to the temple in Jerusalem during Passover and spread around human remains to scandalize and disrupt the feast. That was in the lifetime of Jesus. The disciples displayed the resulting racism of this history. In Luke 9 Jesus and his disciples enter into Samaria and they don't feel they get the hospitality they deserve. In response John says to Jesus let's call fire down from heaven to consume them all!

Vs. 4 – they were scattered as a result of the persecution. In his sovereignty God works through the persecution to bring the good news of his kingdom beyond Jerusalem.

Vs. 5 – God uses his chosen man Philip to speak the good news

Vs. 6-7 – God empowers him to bring about the signs of the kingdom – the lame are healed, the demon-possessed are freed

Vs. 8 – there is the attending joy of new birth in Jesus.

3. (vs. 9-13) Who was Simon? What evidence does Luke give us for the mixed nature of Simon's heart?

Simon was a Magician – he has amassed power, influence and wealth by being the kind of person you could come to to leverage his power for your own ends

He stays close to Philip and seems amazed by the signs and miracles. Is he only interested in those? Only interested in Power?

Read Acts 2:38

4. What is the normative pattern for reception of the Holy Spirit?

Repent – believe – be baptized – and you too will receive the Spirit.

This is why commentators call Acts 8 the strangest story in the new testament. For Philip preaches the gospel and the Samaritans repent, believe, are baptized, but no Holy Spirit.

5. (vs. 14-17) This text is often seen as a proof text for a two-stage initiation theology. First receive Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins, and then the baptism of the Spirit through the laying on of hands. What affirmation of this theology can you find in the text? What are the potential pitfalls of such a theology?

That is certainly the narrative flow of this text.

There are two traditions within Christianity who work out this theology in different ways.

The first are Roman Catholics and High Church Anglicans. They believe you must first be baptized as an infant and then at confirmation the apostolic successor (Bishop) must come to lay hands on you so that you receive the Spirit.

The second are Pentecostals and charismatics who believe that you receive Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins and then at a later date you receive the baptism of the Spirit – the Spirit's power and presence and gifts through the laying on of hands. For many Pentecostals the evidence of this is that one speaks in tongues.

The pitfall of this theology is that it sets up two different kinds of Christians. You have the Christian who has accepted Jesus and the one who has also received the Spirit. Since the one who has received the Spirit has gone through this second step there is a sense that grows that somehow they are better, further along, more LIVING than others. As you can imagine this can be quite divisive in a community. This was the case with the Corinthians who said we have the wisdom, the power, the gifts and these others don't – and their community was marked by division.

Read Acts 10: 23b-48 *note - this was with a large group of Gentiles

6. This and Acts 8 are the two stories where God breaks out of the normative pattern found in Acts 2. If not affirming a two-stage initiation what do these texts tell us about why God is breaking out of the normative pattern for reception of the Spirit?

The Samaritans have received Jesus but the question remained – would the church in Jerusalem accept a Samaritan Church?

The church in Jerusalem sends a delegation to Samaria for they have not received the Holy Spirit. It is an incredibly redemptive moment especially for John. John had not long ago called down fire to burn up the Samaritans and now in love gently lays his hands on the Samaritans and through him they receive the Spirit.

If not for this moment the division between Jew and Samaritan would have likely continued into the church. God breaks out of the normative pattern for the sake of the Kingdom.

In Acts 10 Peter is preaching Jesus and the Spirit fills the Gentiles before they have had a chance to repent and believe and be baptized. This moment says to Peter- “I (God) have accepted the gentiles will you? Will you the Jewish church accept an Gentile Church.”

The answer is Yes – if God has not withheld his Spirit who are we to withhold water baptism.

Without this moment there is a very real possibility that the division between Jew and Gentile would have continued in the church. God breaks out of the normative pattern for the sake of the Kingdom.

7. (vs.18-24) How does Peter respond when he sees Simon’s heart?

Immediately – to hell with you and your money – with a heart like that you have no part of this – Repent.

8. As an application Tim invited us not to denigrate the gifts of the spirit but rather to discern the heart of the one wielding the gifts and respond accordingly. How might this work itself out in the life of our church?

This invites us I believe to be very discerning when we are receiving the spiritual gifts of others – we need to discern the heart – and if the heart is self-serving – if the heart is not being formed in the way of Jesus to turn away – and if appropriate in love invite the other to repent.