

Even the Samaritans?

By [Evan D. Garner](#)

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Over the years, I've taught three different series on the Acts of the Apostles, and I'm sure that by the time I hang it up I will have taught at least five more. Each time, I try to do something a little different—never a straight, verse-by-verse exposition of the text but always a particular angle or take on the text as a whole. Most recently, I led a group through an exploration of the first ten chapters of Acts that focused on the different characters of the story. We began with Jesus himself and then took up each major figure (and some minor characters, too) as they presented themselves in the story: Matthias, Peter, the lame beggar, Stephen, etc.

Eventually, we got to Acts 8 and read about Philip, the evangelist who first took the good news of Jesus the Christ to Samaria, where he met Simon the magician. And the text that follows that missionary journey is the epistle lesson for Sunday (Acts 8:14-17).

On Sunday, we're commemorating the baptism of Jesus, and this lesson from Acts gives us a sense of the power of Jesus' baptism and the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the believers. But I think there is more to these four verses than a reflection of Jesus' baptism, and it helps to have some context.

These were Samaritans. Since Pentecost, the gospel had spread throughout Jerusalem and then through Judea. It had been rejected by the Jewish religious authorities yet embraced by the multitudes that heard it. Momentum in the Christian movement was increasing, and, ethnically speaking, the Samaritans were the next logical recipients of the good news ... but only barely.

Samaritans were genetically and culturally related to the Jews, but, ever since the two groups were split during the turmoil of the Babylonian Exile, they resented each other. There's a lot to say about that, but, for now, suffice it to say that Samaritans had their own place of worship and their own understanding of the Hebrew scriptures—namely, that the only sacred writings were the Torah or the first five books of the Bible. Because of that, Samaritans didn't have the same messianic

expectations that the Jews had. Think about it: where in the Bible does it talk about God's anointed one coming and rescuing or redeeming his people? Not in the Pentateuch. So the good news of Jesus as the Christ was ground-breaking, unanticipated, paradigm-altering news for the Samaritans.

When Philip arrived, he proclaimed to them Jesus as the Christ (8:4). He did amazing signs for them, and many believed. They were baptized by Philip, but none of the converts received the Holy Spirit. As we read in verse 16, "they had been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus," but the full Spirit-filled, Spirit-transmitting baptism had not been offered to them. And it is the apostles—the Jesus-appointed leaders—who come and pray and lay hands on the Samaritan converts, which results in them receiving the Spirit.

Keep in mind that Philip, although an amazing evangelist, wasn't an apostle. He was a deacon, a table-server who had been appointed and ordained by the apostles in Acts 6. This story in Acts 8, therefore, is a remarkable tale of both the spread of the gospel and also the order and hierarchy through which that spread is transmitted.

On Sunday, this short reading from Acts 8 reminds us that God is doing amazing, earth-shattering things. God's kingdom includes people and places that seem unlikely candidates for conversion. Yet these few verses also show us that the work of the Spirit, though radical and more inclusive than we can imagine, must be folded into the structure and mission of the church. We must allow the church to embrace and be shaped by the work of the Spirit, and we must see that the Spirit's work always finds its place in the church.

God's work is not to splinter off new and separate groups. God's work is to bring a wider and wider range into the fold. That isn't easy for the institution or for those on the fringe, but that's how the Spirit works.

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