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"They believed Philip preaching" (Acts 8.12): A REPLY /1

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I am grateful to Professor Russell for his comments on a small but important part of my thesis in Baptism in the Holy Spirit, and for the careful attention he has given to the considerations I marshalled at that point. I readily admit that this was not the strongest part of my discussion of Acts, and that if my interpretation of Luke's intention is correct, Luke could have made his meaning a good deal clearer. But I was driven to search for an alternative explanation by the unsatisfactory nature of the other interpretations offered for what all are agreed is a rather difficult passage which raises several puzzling questions.

The question which has posed the greatest puzzles for successive generations of commentators is the relation between faith, baptism and the gift of the Spirit in Acts 8: "the Samaritans believed Philip preaching concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ and were baptized", but by the time of Peter and John's visit the Spirit "had not yet fallen on any one of them, they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 8. 12,16). Three factors have become increasingly clear to me since I began my research into such questions nearly fifteen years ago and these continue to determine for me the parameters within which the interpretation of the Samaritan incident must be found:

1) Luke clearly thought that the Spirit had not been given to the Samaritans before Peter and John laid their hands on them. It cannot successfully be argued that Luke thought of the (already received) Spirit now merely making his presence known in visible manifestation, for it is clear enough from the rest of Luke's writings that this is the way he conceptualized the Spirit as a tangible power whose impact on an individual or group is as much physical as anything else. /1 Indeed, he never thinks of the Spirit being given in any other terms- whether to Jesus ("descending in bodily form as a dove"- Luke 3.22), or to the first disciples ("a sound like the roar of a mighty wind...tongues like fire ...they began to speak in other tongues"- Acts 2. 2-4),

to Cornelius and his friends' (Peter and the others knew that the Spirit had been poured out on them "for they heard them speaking in tongues and magnifying God"- Acts 10.45-6), and to the Ephesian 'disciples' ("They spoke in tongues and prophesied"- Acts 19.6). The question in Acts 19.2, "Did you receive the Spirit when you believed?" obviously presumes that those who received the Spirit would know it, and not just as a deduction drawn from the fact that they had believed (whether they had experienced anything or not). So it is not surprising when we read Acts 2.33- Jesus "having been exalted to the right hand of God received the promise of the Holy Spirit from the Father and poured out this which you see and hear"-where the gift of the Spirit is actually described as the ecstatic behaviour and glossolalia of the disciples on the day of Pentecost.

So too in Acts 8.18 - Simon saw what happened to the Samaritans when Peter and John laid hands on them; that is, "he saw that the Spirit was being given through the laying on of the apostles' hands". In other words, Luke's presentation of the gift of the Spirit in Acts 8 is wholly of a piece with his understanding of what was involved elsewhere in his writings. In his mind the Spirit had not come to the Samaritan believers before Peter and John's visit. And it was his intention to convey precisely this fact- "the Spirit had not yet fallen on any of them, they had only been baptized...." /2

2) Luke shared the regular view among the major NT writers that it is the gift of the Spirit which constitutes a Christian.

In some ways this is a more controversial claim, but I think it can be sustained. For other writers we need think merely of Romans 8.9 - "If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his"; 1 Corinthians 12.13 - "in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body... and we were all drenched with one Spirit"; /3 Galatians 3. 6-14 - "the promise of the Spirit" is "the blessing of Abraham" is "justification by faith"; John 7.37-39 - "Jesus said, 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to me; and let him drink, he who believes in me. As the Scripture said, Rivers of living water will flow from him'". /4 This he said concerning the Spirit which those who believed in him would receive"; 1 John 4.13 - "By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given /5

us to share in his Spirit".

For Acts the same viewpoint emerges from a consideration of the other two of his conversion narratives where the gift of the Spirit is specifically recorded. According to Acts 10.43-47 and 11.14-18 the Spirit fell upon Cornelius and his friends just at the point where Peter had explained God's offer of forgiveness and salvation. Peter concludes from seeing the Spirit thus given that God had thereby accepted them - "If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?" (11.17) Clearly here the gift of the Spirit is synonymous with, or the Spirit is the bearer of, forgiveness, salvation and life (11.18); the gift of the Spirit was understood to have embodied that acceptance by God, to have established that relationship with God which is what conversion, justification etc., are all about. So too Acts 19.2. When Paul met a group who evidently claimed to be 'believers', /6 but just as clearly were lacking in that visibly manifested Spirit, the question he put was the decisive one which would tell whether they were indeed believers in Christ or not- "Did you receive the Spirit when you believed?", or as we might justly paraphrase, "You say you are believers, but did you receive the Spirit when you made this commitment that you speak of?" We could even include the only other episode where Luke describes the gift of the Spirit to a group - Pentecost itself; for Acts 11.17 describes that too in terms of conversion - Cornelius has received the Spirit just as we received the Spirit "when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ".

In short, in every other case (leaving aside Acts 8) it is clear enough that the gift of the Spirit was for Luke what marked out those who believed in Christ. Like Paul and John Luke was firmly of the view that it is the gift of the Spirit whereby God accepts a man, the Spirit thus given which makes a man a Christian.

3) Luke also shared the regular view among NT writers that the Spirit was given to faith.

When a man believed in Christ he received the Spirit from God through Christ. Again, so far as the other major NT writers are concerned, we need simply think of Galatians 3.2-3 - "Did you receive the Spirit by works of law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun with

with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?" As for John we need simply recall John 7.39 - "This he said concerning the Spirit which those who believed in him would receive". Acts is if anything clearer on this point. We have already quoted 11.17 - the Spirit is the gift given by God to individuals when they believe in, commit themselves to the Lord Jesus Christ - said with reference both to Cornelius and his friends and to the first disciples at Pentecost. In the other reference to the conversion of Cornelius Peter describes it thus - "God gave the Holy Spirit to them as he had to us, and made no discrimination between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith" (15.8-9) - where the gift of the Spirit and "cleansing their hearts by faith" are clearly alternative descriptions of the same event (cf 11.15-18). Paul's question to the Ephesian 'disciples' in 19.2 reveals the same association in Luke's mind (and Paul's) between the gift of the Spirit and that step of commitment by which Luke regularly denotes conversion /7 - "Did you receive the Spirit when you believed?" - the implication being that if they had believed, taken the step of commitment, they would have received the Spirit.

Thus three things seem to be clear when we try to reconstruct the context of Luke's thought and understanding within which we must seek after the meaning he intended to convey in his narrative in Acts 8.4-24: Luke believed that the gift of the Spirit was the central element in conversion-initiation - without the Spirit the individual could not be said to be accepted by God, to have received God's forgiveness and salvation; Luke's understanding was that the Spirit was given when the individual believed, committed himself to Jesus as Lord; but so far as the Samaritans were concerned, they did not receive the Spirit until a lengthy period had elapsed after their baptism.

The question remaining to us therefore is how Luke would have understood this situation, how he would have intended his readers to understand it. We could argue that Luke saw the Samaritans as a special case - the antagonism between Jew and Samaritan being well known (cf Luke 9.52-56; 10.30-37). But there is no hint of that in the narrative, and while it is not implausible in itself, as an explanation it has to be imported entirely into the passage. We might alternatively argue that Luke had no view of the question, that it was not a question for him; he simply recorded faithfully what his sources narrated. But while this is by no means impossible, it does not altogether square with the

clear message and emphasis which seems to be at the heart of the accounts of Cornelius and the Ephesians in Acts 10-11 and 19.1-6, on the centrality of the gift of the Spirit in these cases. In view of the prominence of the Spirit in Luke's own thinking /8 it is hardly likely that Luke had no interpretation of the events he recorded in Acts 8.

If we may presume therefore that Luke tried to make some theological sense of the Samaritan episode, what was it? The merit of my own suggestion, if I may be so bold, was that it drew attention to several hints in the account itself which pointed to an answer, and one which is in complete accord with the three basic elements in Luke's thinking to which we have already drawn attention. That Luke could have drawn out these hints more clearly is an inadequate answer, since other explanations do not even have hints to build on. Nor will it do to question whether Luke was capable of sophisticated allusions and refined nuances - Luke could produce a very elegant style when he wanted and his theological capacity has been clearly highlighted since the advent of so-called 'redaction criticism'. /9

The clearest of these hints is that relating to the Samaritans' faith, to which Professor Russell devoted much of his paper. Here the key point is Luke's description of their faith - 'they believed Philip....'. The distinction between pisteuein with the dative and pist-euein eis with the accusative is well known in biblical Greek, the former denoting belief about, belief that (intellectual assent to what another says), the latter denoting belief into, commitment to the person named. / 10 Now it is true that Luke uses the dative construction in some instances where we might have expected the eis with accusative construction (16.34 - "believed in God"; 18.8 - "believed in the Lord"). /11 But he also uses the dative construction to denote intellectual assent in 24.14 and 26.27. And, more important, he never elsewhere describes commitment by pisteuein with the dative of the person who proclaimed the Gospel. This construction would, after all, be quite inadequate to describe that commitment to the Lord which was what mattered. The act of commitment by which individuals became 'believers' is never simply belief in what someone else said about the Lord, be it Peter or Paul or Philip, but commitment to

the Lord himself. This wholly unique description in 8.12 is only a hint, to be sure, but it is a hint, and when Luke has given no other indication of his intended meaning we must accept what hints he has thrown out. That is to say, in this case we must assume that the uniqueness of his construction in 8.12 is not accidental, but a deliberate clue which the observant reader asking the right questions (about the importance of the Spirit and faith) would observe and read aright.

The implication then is that Luke understood the Samaritans' faith to be defective to some degree. This hint is confirmed first by the news that Simon also 'believed', once we read it in the light which the sequel throws in the character of Simon (8.18-23); and second by the news that none of the Samaritans received the Spirit at that time, which would indicate, in view of the faith-Spirit link, that their faith had been defective.

These are the principal hints to the meaning that Luke would have intended. The further considerations which I marshalled in Baptism, most of which Professor Russell discusses in the first part of his paper, are possible pointers to the explanation of the events at the historical level, if we may assume for the present purposes that Luke's account is strictly historical. If the Samaritans did indeed respond warmly to Philip's message, were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, and yet did not receive the Spirit, then what was the historical explanation? Luke suggests their faith was defective. How could that be? The answer may be simply that they were a people of a rather volatile sentiment who misinterpreted Philip's preaching and whose response therefore was wrongly directed. Luke does not help us much, if at all on this question. But his description of the Samaritans and of Philip's message is certainly consistent with such an explanation and may well point in that direction. At this point Professor Russell suggests that I imply that 'the Christian message from a certain slant could be seen as Jewish' (above p.xx 2 in ms). I find this comment odd since of course the Christian message was in a very important sense and to a very important degree 'Jewish', concerning the Messiah of Jewish expectation - that Jesus was he. My point is not that Philip's preaching was sub-Christian or pre-Christian, but that in the Samaritan context it could have been understood in a way that Philip had not entirely intended, in a way that nobody else

understood it, since the Samaritan context was so distinctive.

With this restatement I rest my case. Fuller treatment of particular points, especially those in the preceding paragraph will be found in Baptism. The explanation is not as compelling as I would wish, but when Luke has left us only a few clues as to his meaning in this very compressed passage, we have to be content with those he did provide. Despite Professor Russell's criticisms I would still wish to maintain that my interpretation of Luke's meaning makes the best sense of what he has actually written, and best accords with his theology of conversion-initiation insofar as that comes to expression elsewhere in Acts. It also gives a plausible explanation of the historical episode itself(if Luke's account is accurate), which is consistent with the historical context of the time and with Luke's actual description. Can any alternative explanation claim as much?

Notes

1. That it is a Lukan tendency to think of spiritual phenomena in concrete, tangible terms is demonstrated in Jesus and the Spirit, SCM Press 1975, pp.121ff, 190
2. I have shown the equivalence of the various verbs which Luke uses to describe the gift of the Spirit in Baptism pp.70-72.
3. Note the vigorous metaphors like those used by Luke
4. That is, from Jesus to the believer - cf.4.14, 19.34; 20.22; see Baptism pp.179f.
5. The tense denotes an action in the past whose effect continues in the present.
6. See Baptism pp.84f
7. cf.2.44;4.32;9.42;11.17;13.12,48; 14.1,23,etc
8. E.g.,cf.Luke 4.1,14,18;10.21 and 11.13 with parallel passages in the other Gospels
9. Professor Russell himself argues that"Luke is careful to make a distinction that is important between his uses of prosecho " (above p.xx ms.p.4)
10. See Arndt & Gingrich, Gk-English Lexicon of NT,pisteuein.
11. 5.14 is disputed; RSV translates,"More than ever believers were added to the Lord".