

First Contact

1. The Samaritan Incident Acts 8:1-25

First Contact. There was a Star Trek film of that name and if you are an avid watcher of Star Trek you'll find that the four different series and the films usually involved meeting new civilisations.

Of course, it's all fiction, but very often it was a commentary on life on our own planet. In the past so often, the first contact between people of different cultures and backgrounds produced disastrous results. What about the story of the five missionaries who met the Auca Indians in the Amazon in 1958? They thought they had come in peace but the Indians saw it differently and murdered them. First contact of people of different cultures but it went wrong.

We know in the long run that the Lord made it for good and the men who killed them came to know the Lord. This is what First Contact is about. Communicating the truths of God to a new people and new culture. How do we do it? And what issues do we have to face to bring the timeless, unchanging gospel to a society that is so different? And what's more, it challenges our perception of our faith and our values and makes us divide in our lives what are the timeless truths of God and what are our own traditions and prejudices.

This series is based on Acts and we are going to see how the church started to face new challenges as it spread out of Jerusalem. Back at the end of last year we saw how the church suddenly burst into existence on the Day of Pentecost and how the believers began to function as the church. It started life as a Jewish church. The people in Jerusalem might have come from all over the Roman Empire and beyond but they were probably Jews of the Diaspora - those who had spread around the Empire as a result of previous persecution and conflict.

It was a Jewish church and the Apostles had to deal with the basic problems of existence - defending themselves against the authorities and sorting out disputes as the number steadily grew. But the church was Jewish and largely Judea-based.

The disciples had been called to proclaim the gospel in Judea and Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the Earth (Acts 1:8) but by the death of Stephen in Acts 7 they hadn't got much further than Judea. They were Jews and if they were going to be the church of Acts 1:8 they needed to make contact with people of other backgrounds and we will see throughout the whole of the New Testament that for these Jews, it demanded a whole sea-change in their attitudes. And sometimes that took persuading. That's what First Contact is about. We see how in Acts, the Apostles were forced to accept things that went against every fibre of their Jewishness, realising there is a difference

between the Gospel and the bits of human culture that we want to add to it but aren't necessary for salvation.

So how did the Gospel get to Samaria? Because the disciples were pushed to it.

I went to my old church the other week for the induction of their new pastor, Barry King. He has chosen for his first series the prophecy of Jonah. It's a familiar piece of scripture and sometimes familiarity means we miss the truths that are there. He noted this verse in Jonah 1 verse 4 *Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up.* He commented that so often we blame other things for calamity that we fail to see the hand of God. But the way in which the Lord brought Jonah to his senses was that He sent a wind, and then sent a fish to swallow Jonah.

And the same is true of Acts 8. As the church grew in Jerusalem, it needed a "kick in the pants" to get it out into Samaria and persecution is how it got delivered and the deliverer was God's chosen man to do it - someone who also did the "uttermost parts of the earth" bit later on. What's more, the guy didn't even know he was serving God's purposes at the time! How gracious God is. Let's read shall we?

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. 2 Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. 3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison. 4 Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

The persecution broke out and right at the centre of it was Saul of Tarsus - Paul - God's man to take the gospel from the Jews out into the Roman world - but he didn't know that yet. And here he was, driving the disciples out of Judea to elsewhere.

All except the Apostles fled. Was that the end? Of course not, rather than hide in holes, the disciples preached as they went from village to village. How do we face it when we have a difficult time; do we freeze and hide, or do we use it to our opportunity?

Never see difficult times as bad, because we find plenty of situations of seeming calamity in scripture which God used for His advantage. And none of us are immune from problems in life. In 2 Corinthians 12: 7 Paul himself had a thorn in the flesh. We don't know what it was, but he says this of it:

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect

in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

Are you going through a difficult time - His grace is sufficient. So walk in it and take your opportunities to give glory to God in the way you live and to the people you meet.

And that's what Philip did - in Samaria. Now we know that Jesus had no problem sharing the gospel in Samaria but for most Jews it was a no-no place and up until that point it seems to have been a problem for the disciples. The Samaritans had their own religion that was a perversion of Judaism and they were given to idolatry and witchcraft and Simon the Magician is an example of this. They were into everything banned by Jewish law. This was anathema to the Jews - they steered clear of the dreadful Samaritans.

Philip preaches the gospel and the impact is remarkable; verse 5 *Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. So there was great joy in that city*

The gospel was accepted and the power of God was manifest. Great we say. That's fantastic. I bet the Apostles were really pleased that the gospel was spreading. Not so. Here were **Samaritans** accepting Christ. They weren't Jews as such. Non-Jews accepting Christ? It hadn't been heard of before. Well, they were of Israelite descent but interbred. and we'll deal with Gentiles in later weeks. Could this really be true. Was it valid that these people accept Christ? What we'll see in later weeks is that many Jewish converts found it impossible to believe that people could accept Christ without becoming Jews and accepting the responsibilities of the Torah, the Mosaic laws.

There was only one thing to do - investigate : 14 *When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. 15 When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, 16 because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. 17 Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.*

These verses have been much disputed over the years between Pentecostals and others. As you know, Pentecostals believe that the Holy Spirit is received after conversion and water baptism. They usually cite this passage and the conversion of the Ephesians in Acts 19. However, always base your theology on the whole of the Word of God, not just a couple of proof texts. Than look at what appears to be a departure and see why.

So for example, in Acts 19 the Ephesian converts from Apollos' preaching had not received the Holy Spirit until Paul had come and laid his hands on them. In that case they had only heard the message of John the Baptist -

they hadn't heard the gospel of Jesus Christ and they received the Holy Spirit when they heard and received it from Paul. It isn't helped by the poor phrasing Authorised Version translation which is largely to blame for this misconception.

19:1 And it came to pass, that, while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper coasts came to Ephesus: and finding certain disciples, 2 He said unto them, Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed? And they said unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost. 3 And he said unto them, Unto what then were ye baptized? And they said, Unto John's baptism.

The "since ye believed" bit suggests a gap of time. The correct translation of that phrase actually is "Did you receive the Holy Spirit, having believed".

Having the Holy Spirit is consequent on belief. Look at Romans 8:9 You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. 10 But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. 11 And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.

That's why I've taught consistently that having the indwelling Holy Spirit is a mark of every believer. That is the understanding of most evangelicals, Baptists and most non-Pentecostal Charismatics.

Why haven't I mentioned much about the baptism of the Holy Spirit in this sermon? Most sermons I've heard on this are debates about the baptism of the Spirit. But what is LUKE trying to tell us? Peter and John needed to know that Samaritans could become believers and this was a pretty emphatic way of showing it. And how did they know that they came believers - because they received the Spirit? The words baptism of the Spirit don't appear here - they're not meant to appear because it's not the issue. It's not the intent of the passage. So we get to leave the baptism of the Spirit for another occasion.

So what was going on in Acts 8 then? Why did these people not receive the Spirit until Peter and John came? Luke didn't have any of our theological baggage on his mind about the baptism of the Spirit as he penned this. All he was doing was to tell his readers, particularly Jewish converts and everybody else that Samaritans could become Christians because the Spirit was poured out on them.

Strong manifestations of the Spirit in Acts were a mark to the disciples that God was present and acting in people's lives. It was a testimony that the Holy Spirit was at work. And **Peter and John** needed it: to rid them of any misconception that only "fully paid up" Jews could enter into Christ completely. All through the first century some Jewish Christians continued to

claim that people had to be Jewish proselytes to be Christians and this was a major issue in a large chunk of the New Testament and which is why this incident is recorded in God's Word. It drives a coach and horses through this notion and is historic testimony that God pours out His Spirit on non-Jews even though they never have had any claim or connection to the Jewish Law and no intention of keeping it in the future.

So that's why the Holy Spirit didn't fall on the Samaritan converts until the Apostles themselves laid their hands on them in Acts 8. I know what Romans 8:9 says but the Spirit moves where He will not according to how we would like it. To be inconvenient here; in the case of Cornelius in Acts 10:44-46 the people were baptised in the Spirit pretty spontaneously even before they had confessed faith or were baptised!

In both cases confirmation from God in public that Samaritans and even Gentiles could become Christians by exactly the same thing happening to them as happened on the day of Pentecost. It needed to happen, not for the Samaritans, but to shift the hitherto Jewish Christians into a different frame of mind - a different way of looking from their Jewish past.

Why is this passage important to us as we embark on reaching out into our community? Because we are going to encounter people who are quite different to us. They are going to have problems that we have never personally encountered. And in bringing them the timeless unchanging Gospel, we are going to have to minister to them in ways we haven't before. We are going to find it difficult. If we find changes that are intended to make our worship more accessible to a wider range of people, how much more difficult are we going to find it when the people themselves materialise. It is something we need to search our hearts about. When I came 9 months ago, it was the desire of the Church that I should lead you into reaching out into our community in Swaffham. I believe for the sake of the lost in Swaffham that is our course of action. How shall they hear without a preacher?

But that costs. For Peter and John it cost them their preconceptions about Samaritans and they had to go and *touch* them. Imagine that - touch an unclean Samaritan. For us it costs to. I know some of you have realised that. And it's difficult.

But this passage also helps us as we are challenged by new people and new things. Because all change is not good. If change is not of God it's just as damaging as standing still. So what evidence was there in this incident that helped Peter, John and Philip to see that God was at work in this situation?

1. There was evidence of changed lives

Verse 6 *When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. So there was great joy in that city.*

The gospel changes lives. You can't get away from that fact. Maybe you have that experience in your own life. One of the things we teaching Sharing Jesus is that meeting felt needs often opens the door to minister to people's real need. As we talk to people we minister to them, we pray for them and see God working in their lives. And God's power is often manifest in these situations and it brings people to faith.

As you know the main gripe I have of much modern evangelism is that it does not call for repentance. We can talk about eternal life, and our life now and even forgiveness of sin. But if we have understood the gospel we should see repentance - changed lives. How were demons driven out, how were people healed? By the Holy Spirit. He was already there working in people's lives even before Peter and John came.

2. The Holy Spirit was evident in their lives

The thing that seems to have clinched it for Peter and John was the way in which these people showed evidence of the mighty work of the Holy Spirit in their lives in the same way that He had done in theirs. That seems to have been the significance of their receiving the Holy Spirit in power subsequent to their conversion and baptism. They needed convincing.

This was the significant thing in Samaria. The manifestation of the Spirit confirmed God's presence in their lives. But what is the evidence of Spirit at work in people's lives?

Tongues? Miracles? Some of the godliest people I have ever known never spoke a tongue in their lives, although I know godly people that do. But there is one thing that shows evidence of the Spirit at work - holiness. When God's people are filled with His Spirit, people see Jesus in them - and that's a testimony in itself. The Spirit is a HOLY Spirit. Changed lives, holy lives, Christ-like lives shine out. That's what started at Samaria.

3. There was evidence of a work of grace

The final evidence that God was at work was that it was a work of grace. We are never really told if Simon was truly a believer, but what we do know is that having seen his power and his influence destroyed, he thought that the power of the Holy Spirit could be bought - that like Peter and John, he could buy into being an apostle. He had not understood grace. The Holy Spirit uses those He will to the glory of God because the work of God is a work of grace. It also goes to demonstrate that we can't have the Holy Spirit as we want Him.

One of the problems that the moving of the Spirit that has occurred in many churches over the last few years has been the way in which people seek after experiences and believe that if they live in a certain way, worship in a certain way, have a certain amount of faith - then they will see manifestations of the Spirit in their lives. The Holy Spirit blows where He will. Works of the Spirit in people's lives, "power manifestations" if you like, are products of the grace and mercy of God. We can't buy them or manufacture them. But where God

is working, you see evidence of the Spirit at work and in power - most of all because people are coming to Christ and we see lives transformed as that happens.

We are called to reach the people of Swaffham. Let's seek God's face and God's will in how we move forward. Not just to see changed lives as people come to Christ, but to see our lives changed as the Holy Spirit works in and through us to build His Church here in Swaffham.

The change for Peter and John was that they went straight from Jerusalem to investigate the Samaritan conversions, but they went back preaching in Samaritan villages (v25). The gospel brings change, not just to the saved, but to the preachers!



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