



What? Them?

Acts 8:4-25

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 civilizations.

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 – particularly by exposing ones that we never thought we had!

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. The Church suddenly burst into existence on the Day of Pentecost and 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 our disputes as the number steadily grew. But the church was Jewish and largely Judea-based.

The disciples had been called to be witnesses 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 this series 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. 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?

8:1 On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. 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 there 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:

7 But to keep me from being puffed up with pride because of the many wonderful things I saw, I was given a painful physical ailment, which acts as Satan's messenger to beat me and keep me from being proud. 8 Three times I prayed to the Lord about this and asked him to take it away. 9 But his answer was: "My grace is all you need, for my power is greatest when you are weak

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 to the principal city in Samaria and preached the Messiah to the people there. 6 The crowds paid close attention to what Philip said, as they listened to him and saw the miracles that he performed. 7 Evil spirits came out from many people with a loud cry, and many paralyzed and lame people were healed. 8 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. Non-Jews accepting Christ? It hadn't been heard of before. Well, they were kind of "half-Jews" 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 The apostles in Jerusalem heard that the people of Samaria had received the word of God, so they sent Peter and John to them. 15 When they arrived, they prayed for the believers that they might receive the Holy Spirit. 16 For the Holy Spirit had not yet come down on any of them; they had only been baptized in 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 Christians. Most sermons I've heard on this chapter 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! I'm going to leave the baptism of the Spirit for another time - as this sermon isn't about that *per se*.

So what was going on in Acts 8 then? Why did these people not receive the Spirit (as is the norm) 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. His dramatic presence showed that clearly to 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 baptized in the Spirit pretty spontaneously even before they had confessed faith or were baptized!

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 trying to reap God's harvest here in Walton? Because we 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. It's not just a case of just going out and doing some evangelism that we haven't done before – but it's changing our mindset. And 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. And as the weeks and months unfold, we'll be able to see that more clearly.

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?

- 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 I teach when I help people share their faith is that meeting felt needs often opens the door to minister to people's real need. As we get to know people we minister to them, we serve them, we help 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.

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.

Remember this when you consider reaping the harvest – if we do things prayerfully, we don't go in cold, but the Spirit has been there first preparing them for meeting us. When someone comes to Christ, it is a culmination of a journey that have spent with the Holy Spirit – and they never realised He was there.

- 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. And we all know God is at work when we see answered prayer – whether it's spectacular or more low key.

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. And you as well as I know that changed lives change lives. Some changes are spectacular – others less so.

Do we want to be convincing witnesses – then we need to have lives that change lives. How does that happen? By allowing the Holy Spirit to challenge and change us. That's what Simon did not understand. He thought that the Spirit could be bought. Yet God wants to challenge and change us by His Spirit and He does that freely by His grace.

There's another change too. 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! The Holy Spirit had changed their minds. Pray that He will do that with ours.

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