

The Samaritan Problem

Hespeler, 9 January 2021 © Scott McAndless

Isaiah 43:1-7, Psalm 29, [Acts 8:14-17](#), Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 (Click to Read)

The church is facing an unprecedented crisis, one that absolutely threatens its very existence. And the leaders have all come together to figure out how they are going to deal with it. You see, there was a time not all that long ago when the church and its message was considered to be socially acceptable. I mean, maybe not everybody agreed with everything that the church was doing but, at least they saw the people in a good light.

But now, all of a sudden, that seems to be changing. Why, just recently there was a church leader that a bunch of people tried to cancel because they found his views to be offensive. And, as a result, a lot of the believers have been spooked. They are not so sure anymore that they can really trust the institution of the church and they have set out to try and establish and live out their Christian faith on their own terms.

Deconstructing Faith

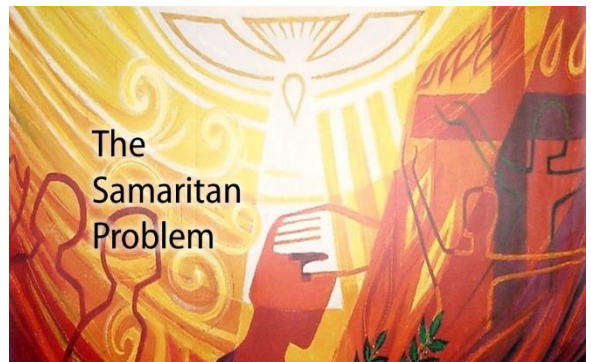
They are, to use a word that has become popular lately, deconstructing their faith. They are kind of tearing it apart and examining every part of it to try and decide what they can do without and what, if anything, is worth keeping. They are then reassembling their faith in a new way and in a new place. Some of them have figured out how to live out that faith in innovative ways, without all of the structures that had traditionally been there. Some are calling this an emergent way of being the church

But the really odd thing is that this strange, jury-rigged faith actually seems to be connecting to the people that they have encountered. Somehow, despite the lack of traditional structures and different ways of doing things, the message about Christ and his love and amazing grace is still getting through to people. So, this emergent church has been seeing some growth

The Leaders are Concerned

But the traditional leaders of the church are concerned. They have remained where they have been and so all of this innovation and growth has taken place without their leadership and sanction. They are justifiably concerned that it will lead to the faith going way off track. So, they have gotten together to talk about what they should do. For a while, they do give a lot of consideration to how they might be able to shut all of this down. Maybe they should be putting out statements that deconstruction is going to get people condemned to hell or that these emergent type churches aren't *real* churches. Maybe one of them, one who commands true respect, should go out and rebuke these people for their free thinking and innovation.

There is so much at stake that the arguments rage late into the afternoon. But then, tired of arguing, they decide to take a different approach. They pause for prayer and open their hearts to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And that is how they ultimately come up with a very different kind of



plan. They decide that two of the most important leaders in the entire church, Peter and John, will go out and they will lay their hands on the believers in Samaria so that the Holy Spirit may clearly be seen as part of the work that they are doing out there.

Acts and the Growth of the Church

At the very beginning of the Book of Acts, the author who, by the way, is the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke, tells us exactly how the story he's going to tell is going to unfold. He puts his summary of the plot of the book on the lips of Jesus just before he ascends into heaven. **“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you;”** Jesus says, **“and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”**

So, in the writer's mind, these steps in the growth of the church and the expansion of its impact from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and beyond were inevitable. It was bound to be a story of continual triumph and success. But it is kind of easy to look on such events in hindsight and see them that way. It was likely a little different to actually live through them. In fact, if you read between the lines, it is pretty clear that the early church actually experienced these transitions as crises and problems to solve.

We certainly see that clearly when the church makes the jump to “the ends of the earth,” especially through the ministry and preaching of the Apostle Paul. In fact, the church nearly tore itself apart as it dealt with the very difficult questions that Paul's ministry raised – questions about the keeping of the law, circumcision and the eating of blood and animals sacrificed to other gods.

The Samaritan Problem

And there is no doubt that the early church saw the transition into Samaria as similarly problematic. You can understand why. Jews and Samaritans generally did not agree about anything, especially when it came to religious matters. They had different scriptures and different ways of worshipping even if the Jews grudgingly admitted that they actually worshipped the same God.

So, there is no question that the leadership in Jerusalem, who, according to Luke, was left behind in Jerusalem following the “cancellation” of Stephen the martyr, was very concerned about what the Samaritans might do if they were allowed to co-opt the Christian faith. It is certainly very likely that the apostles in Jerusalem debated excluding the Samaritans from the young church or putting some severe restrictions on them. They certainly would have hesitated to allow them to just live out the faith in the way that suited them most.

Receiving the Holy Spirit

That is why what the apostles actually did is so important. We are told that they sent Peter and John, two of the most important leaders in the church, to Samaria so that the Samaritans might receive the Holy Spirit. Now, the giving of the Holy Spirit is a very important matter in the Book of Acts. The author of this book makes a great deal about the various manifestations of the Holy Spirit throughout his story.

The gift of the Holy Spirit, often accompanied by signs and marvels such as speaking in strange tongues, always accompanies any important transition in the life of the church. It is there on the day of Pentecost when the apostles are given their leadership and authority. It is there when Peter first takes the gospel to a Gentile family.

The gift of the Holy Spirit obviously means many things. It is about power and ecstasy and about bringing the entire community of the church together. It is a sign of the power of the gospel to change people's lives. But above all, it is what gives the believers the power and authority to work out the faith in their context. Because they have the Spirit, Christians can confidently interpret the scriptures and the sayings of Jesus and they have the power to determine for themselves how they are going to live out these truths.

Troublesome Transitions

So, in many ways, the Samaritan problem was one of the first really big challenges that the apostolic leadership of the church had to face. The question was whether they were going to hold onto that power to define and control the way the faith was lived out or if they were going to allow others to share in that power. They had all kinds of reasons not to do what they did. I'm sure it would have seemed much safer to them at the time. But, because they did the right thing and decided that the gift of the Holy Spirit could be shared even with Samaritans, the church was able to enter into a brand-new phase of growth that was beginning of truly changing the world.

Now, as I say, because the writer of the Book of Acts sees all of this with hindsight, he just assumes that it was all inevitable. Of course, that was what the church was going to do. But my experience with the church is that we rarely have that much ease in dealing with these kinds of transitions as we live through them. Oh no, we gripe and we complain and we blame people when they start approaching the life of faith in new or innovative ways. We try to do whatever we can to shut it down. Above all, we do not want to give it our blessing.

Examples from our History

Even a light summary of the history of the church will show you that. How many Christian groups down through the centuries have been persecuted and criminalized just for wanting to live out their faith in different ways? The Lutherans were rejected and persecuted by the Catholics for insisting on salvation by faith alone. The Mennonites believed that their faith would not allow them to fight in wars and they were killed or sent into exile because of it. The Anabaptists wanted to celebrate baptisms a little bit differently from other Christians, and so the Presbyterians decided that they should be punished by being drowned. The list goes on and on. But it is really significant that, in the Book of Acts when faced with the Samaritan problem, we are told that the apostles did otherwise.

The Present Crisis

All of this is extremely relevant to the church at this moment in time. I think that the church may be facing yet another Samaritan problem. There are all kinds of reasons why people are no longer approaching the Christian faith as they once did. I'm sure you are aware of many of these trends.

For one thing, we find ourselves living in an age where people are just not very trustful of institutions in general. And so respect for the church as an institution in society has definitely been on the decline. Of course, many have simply abandoned the church entirely, while others have sought to develop their own non-institutional or even anti-institutional Christian practice. The church certainly often experiences this as a threat.

Abuse and Intolerance

There is also no question that the church has been fundamentally damaged by endless stories of abuse. We have come to understand that incidences of abuse of power and authority, of sexual and physical assault are all too common in the church. People have suffered as a result and experienced a great deal of trauma. All of this has certainly made them call into question the very organization of a church, and the theology and teaching that supports it, that seem to allow these kinds of things to continue to happen.

Others have come to the place where the traditional answers the churches have given to the tough questions of life no longer work for them. They are tired of the rejection by some Christians of scientific truths, of the mistreatment of people who do not fit into strict gender or sexuality roles. They have grown tired of the thinly veiled racism that they have encountered. These kinds of things are behind what might be called the deconstruction movement which ends with some rejecting the faith entirely, while others attempt to hold onto certain parts of it as they reconstruct a faith that works for them.

Accelerated by the Pandemic

These are forces that have been at work for some time now. But many of the effects have been accelerated by the strange situation we have been living through for the past two years. The world has just changed too much too quickly. It has changed politically, socially and economically and so people cannot just be content with how we've always done things. It is not that people have given up on faith in general. Yes, some have, but that is not the biggest issue. It is that they have learned to work out their faith in new ways and without needing to rely on institutional supports (like buildings and authority systems and schedules) that were once considered so essential.

What will be our Response?

And so, it seems, the church today is dealing with yet another Samaritan problem. Are we going to fight against this, rail against innovation and different ways of being Christians in the world? Are we going to insist that, in order to be considered good Christians, that they conform to our ideas of how it has to be done? If so, it is quite possible that the church might get left behind in Jerusalem while the real growth is taking place out there in Samaria.

But what if we were to do what those early Apostles did and acknowledge that the Christian faith that is emerging actually does have the Holy Spirit working within it? What if we were to lay our hands upon what God has frankly already been doing out there in Samaria and actually seek to support it, even at the risk of it costing in terms of what we once considered to be our essential institutional supports for the church? I believe that this might be the most important question the church is facing in our time, and I pray that we are open to the leadership of the Holy Spirit as we seek to answer it.