

Them Too? !

There are times when I wonder what it would have been like to have lived in first century Palestine when the Holy Spirit was so active, when the movement being directed by the Lord was so clear that the meaning was obvious that what happened was the work of the Holy Spirit and you just went...but then when you look a little closer at what is described here in the scriptures you realize it wasn't all that clear to everyone. There was a lot of disruptions in what was happening...a lot of patterns were changing...a lot of new ideas were happening and not everyone was happy or accepting of them. There are several instances where we can almost hear the disciples turning to each other and saying...them, too?...they are to be included? The first instance which occurred in Acts was not a passage that we addressed directly. Once the group left hiding in room at Pentecost, they remained in Jerusalem until their refusal to stop proclaiming the good news of Christ's resurrection led to their persecution by the religious leaders. Despite the persecutions, believers continued to come, hear their proclamations and join the group of believers. The message spread outward from Jerusalem as some fled the persecution. Philip had left Jerusalem and gone down to Samaria, not a place where Jews were likely to go or be well received because of the long standing hostility between these two populations since the Babylonian exile and return. But he went there to proclaim the Messiah's coming to them. He found the crowds there listened to him eagerly, so he baptized them in Jesus' name. However, the Apostles at Jerusalem hearing that Samaria had accepted the word of God, sent Peter and John to them to check this out. When they got there, they did not see signs that the Holy Spirit had come upon the people. But arriving there, they prayed and the Holy Spirit did come upon the Samaritans. Thus the importance of the Trinitarian formula was established in the minds of the believers...all aspects of God needed to be present. With the Samaritans receiving the gospel message and the Holy Spirit, the Apostles returned to Jerusalem, proclaiming the message as they went. And Samaritans were now included in the expanding family of God. Philip did not get a breather once he got back to town...he was immediately set out on another journey to engage with another unlikely family candidate...a eunuch from Ethiopia. The connections of the Jewish tradition to Ethiopia is very old, but this particular Ethiopian despite having a Jewish background, despite having traveled to Jerusalem on probably a religious pilgrimage since he was reading from the Isaiah scroll, was an individual who would have been rejected as a full member of any Jewish congregation. Yet here was the Spirit sending Philip out to meet him on this wilderness road, to go up to his chariot and speak to him so he could explain to him the meaning of the Isaiah passage he was at that very moment reading. It seems that the Holy Spirit was declaring that what had been termed unacceptable before was no longer true, for after having the Isaiah message explained to him in terms of the good news of Jesus, suddenly on this Wilderness Road they come to some water. This is not exactly what is usually found alongside this road. The eunuch says to Philip, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" The answer was evidently not a thing. The previous Hebrew Scriptures no longer applied, the Spirit had supplied the answers and the means. Philip baptized the eunuch. Having accomplished what he was sent to do, the Spirit sent him elsewhere to proclaim the good news and the eunuch went home to Ethiopia rejoicing. Sometimes I don't understand the method of verse selection for the readings the lectionary gives. Today is the third Sunday in a row we have a passage from Acts that adds

another group to the family of God, but the reading we have only gives us the very end of the story. We read that Peter is speaking to a group of people but in the text we have we don't really appreciate who they are or what is happening; just that something crucial must have taken place to cause the question of verse 47: "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" Peter is asking the question of those who have come with him from Jerusalem—those who here are called the circumcised believers. That means that he is addressing his fellow believers who were raised in the Jewish tradition but who have come to believe that Jesus is the risen Lord and long awaited Messiah. This narrative actually begins with verse 1 of chapter 10, not with the 44th verse as did our passage, but it serves an interesting point that this steady inclusion of folks into the growing family of believers had the possibility and in some cases the real probability of some uneven stretches and bumps.....The question is raised..."Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" The narrative of chapter 10 is a split narrative which takes place in two locations: one is the home of Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian cohort, thus a Roman soldier who was also described as a God fearing man. The second location is the home of a tanner in Joppa with whom Peter is visiting. Both men receive visions. Cornelius' tells him to send to Joppa with a message for Peter to come to his home. Cornelius complies. Peter goes up on the roof of the house to pray while waiting for his noon meal and has a vision. In this vision, he sees the heavens open and something like a large sheet coming down, lowered by its four corners. On it were all the four footed creatures and reptiles and bird of the air. He hears a voice commanding him to get up, kill and eat. Peter, replied. "By no means Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean. This is repeated. Peter is then told "What the God has made clean, you must not call profane." Evidently Peter was not getting the message because this lowering of the sheet with the creatures on it with the command to take and eat was needed to be repeated three times before the sheet was suddenly taken up to heaven. And Peter was still puzzled and did not know what to make of the vision which was probably interrupted more by the arrival of the messengers from Cornelius than his getting the meaning inherent from the vision. While still thinking about the vision, the Spirit tells Peter to go down and meet with the messengers from Cornelius because the Spirit is the one who has asked Cornelius to send those who are arriving. So Peter gathers up some friend from Joppa and journeys to Caesarea to the home of Cornelius because the Spirit has asked this of him, but when he gets there he doesn't seem to be that overjoyed with the prospect of sharing his time with this group. In fact, he begins by saying: "You, yourselves know that it unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?" So Peter, preached the gospel and the household of Cornelius accepted Christ. As the passage we actually read to acknowledged, the questioned was raised, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing the people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" The question was answered that Peter could not and so he ordered the household of Cornelius baptized. But I wonder....it was quite a step for Peter from not calling Cornelius and his household profane, to obeying the Holy Spirit in proclaiming the gospel news, but do we get the sense that Peter was able to then call those who were gentile followers brothers as he did those who were raised in the same traditions that the was?

If you read closely the letters and other New Testament documents you can still see traces of bitter disputes related to these types of issues as those early believers struggled to find their way. The message early on was that all the peoples were to be included as the Holy Spirit swept over the world...all were to be gathered in...all were to be loved and tended...there was to be one great flock with one Good Shepherd. We have not come near achieving that. We often believe that we have left those types of struggles behind saying we have equality, yet the tendency to judge and declare the other profane is still quite strong; the barriers and walls are quite high; the tendency to turn our eyes away from painful truth is still present; the willingness to willful ignorance can allow us to miss many messages the Holy Spirit sends to us. What we can still clearly read from both our gospel message and those texts about the Holy Spirit is that God's spirit is still active in this world, we may choose to ignore or fail to follow but God does not fail to stop God's activity toward reclaiming the vision of the world Created Good. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

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