In Acts 8:4-25 Luke gives the account of how Philip the deacon went to a city in Samaria and shared the gospel with the people there. Those who heard believed and were baptized. Later Peter and John came and layed their hands on them so that they would receive the Holy Spirit. This comes as a problem to many interpreters, for it seems to contradict their understanding of the Holy Spirit's role in salvation. According to Paul the Holy Spirit begins to indwell believers at regeneration (Rom. 8:9). Therefore, two key questions arise out of the passage: First, were these Samaritans truly Christians when they believed and were baptized? Second, if they were Christians, then why did the Holy Spirit wait until later to fall on them? A critical examination of this passage in light of Luke/Acts should answer these two questions.

The first question which a critical examination should answer is: "Were these Samaritan's really Christians?" According to James D.G. Dunn they were not really Christians until they received the Holy Spirit in verse 14. He does this on the basis of the unusual construction of with the dative (τῷ Φιλίππῳ). According to Dunn, πιστεύω normally takes εἰς or ἐπί with the accusative to indicate genuine faith:

[Luke] indicates thereby that the Samaritans' response was simply an assent of the mind to the acceptability of what Philip was saying and an acquiescence to the course of action he advocated, rather than that commitment distinctively described elsewhere which alone deserves the name 'Christian' (cf. John 2.23-25).

Then, he compares their faith with that of Simon the Magician, and he states that Luke intended to compare their faith (or lack thereof) with Simon's. Since Simon had no share or lot in "the

---

1 This paper was originally presented to Michael Green for a course on the Acts of the Apostles at Regent College, Vancouver, B.C., March 12, 1987. I have made no significant revisions to the paper, but present as it was then. My positions may have changed in the meantime. The paper received the following remark from Michael Green: “Ingenious. But you do not examine Stronstad’s claim as you do Dunn’s. It will not actually work! See the Cornelius incident (ch 10.47) where the H. Sp. is clearly given for initiation not service. Are you right to say what they lacked was ‘the H. Sp. for Service’ when Luke says they lacked the Holy Spirit? A bit too facile, but well-worked through. B+” (emphasis his). [PWD - November 3, 2004]


3Ibid., p. 65. His cross reference, John 2.23-25, interestingly enough, uses plus the accusative. Thus, context, not the case of the object, should decide whether faith is genuine or merely intellectual assent.
matter of salvation"\textsuperscript{4}, Luke intends to show that the Samaritans also exercised defective faith.

How does Luke use \( \piστευω \) in Acts? Twenty times he uses \( \piστευω \) without an object where salvation is the result.\textsuperscript{5} Indeed, Luke uses \( \piστευω \) without an object as almost a synonym for conversion. For example, Acts 17:34 states: "But a few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others."\textsuperscript{6} Luke here uses \( \piστευω \) to describe those who converted to Christianity by joining Paul and believing. In Acts 16:31 Luke sees believing as a necessary step in salvation: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved - you and your household." Therefore, Luke's normal usage of \( \piστευω \) has a soteriological sense, except when he makes it clear by giving an object which clearly points to something other than the gospel, like in Acts 26:27: "...I have faith in God that it happen just as he told me." He also uses the dative as the object in three places where he means undisputably, soteriological believing (5.14; 16.34; 18.8). Thus, Luke's usage of \( \piστευω \) does not support Dunn's contention.

Furthermore, the immediate context strongly indicates that the Samaritans experienced saving faith. The participle in connection with Philip in verse 12, \( ευαγγελιζομαι \), gives Luke's clear intention. It is a present, participle which normally indicates action which occurs concurrent with the main verb. Thus, "they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus"(emphasis mine). Therefore, it is best to see the use of the dative of direct object (\( τω Φιλιππω \)) as metonymy: they believed the message of Philip which was the gospel. Verse 14 further clarifies that it was Philip's message which they believed: "Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria received the word of God..."(NASB). The fact that they received the word of God indicates much more than a mere intellectual assent to the gospel, but genuine faith. Any interpretation that suggests these Samaritans did not exercise saving faith ignores the immediate context of the passage. Thus, the critical examination indicates that the Samaritans were genuine believers and that they had received salvation even before the apostles laid hands on them so that they would receive the Holy Spirit.

\textsuperscript{4}Ibid. This is Dunn's interpretation of which is slightly ambiguous in Luke. What exactly does \( τω λόγω τουτω \) refer to in verse 21? The most obvious interpretation is that of the gift of the Holy Spirit since Simon wanted to purchase the right to dispense this gift. It is quite impossible to discern whether Simon exercised saving faith when he was baptized. Surely his later actions may indicate that he did not. The New Testament, however, does allow for those who seemingly have genuine belief to fall away. Dunn's comparison of Samaritan's faith to that of Simon is not really fair to the text, since Luke shows Simon to be unusual in the first place. He is, therefore, not the prototype of the believers at Samaria.

\textsuperscript{5} One of these is that of Simon, thus, strengthening the fact that either Luke considered Simon's original faith to be genuine, or that he decided not to make a judgment on the matter.

\textsuperscript{6}The NIV will be quoted unless otherwise indicated.
The second key question for this passage naturally follows the answer to the first: "If the Samaritans were true Christians, then why did the Holy Spirit wait until later to fall on them?" This seems to contradict Paul's understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in salvation. In Titus 3.5 he states, "He saved us by the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit." Here the Holy Spirit is directly involved in renewing and regenerating the believer. In Romans 8.9 Paul states that if the Holy Spirit does not dwell in a person, he does not belong to Christ. So if these Samaritans have not yet received the Spirit, then they are not Christians, but Luke has described them as true Christians.

Quite a number have made suggestions on why there is this delay. One major suggestion that has a great deal of merit, centers on the healing of a split. The Jews had a great deal of bias against the Samaritans because of their mixed up religious practices. Could it be that the Sovereign God withheld His Spirit so that the apostles would have to come down and lay hands on them as a gesture which welcomed them into the one church of God? As Bruce states:

In the present instance, some special evidence may have been necessary to assure these Samaritans, so accustomed to being despised as outsiders by the people of Jerusalem, that they were fully incorporated into the new community of the people of God. Not until they had been acknowledged and welcomed by the leaders of the Jerusalem church did they experience the signs which confirmed and attested their membership of the Spirit-possessed community.\(^7\)

Michael Green states that the delay was, more precisely, necessary to avoid a split in the church, an early schism which would have caused two streams of Christianity, Jewish and Samaritan.\(^8\)

Although this view has a great deal of merit, it still has problems. For one, it still has not answered the question of why these Samaritans did not receive the Spirit when they believed and were baptized, since without the Spirit a person has no part in Christ. Furthermore, if they had received the Holy Spirit already, the apostles still would have come down because they came not because the Samaritans had not yet received the Spirit, but because they had received the Word of God. The Spirit would still have made the bond of unity between the Samaritans and the Jews, without the delay and without the apostles' laying on of hands, as the acceptance of the Gentiles shows in Acts 10 and 11. Here the Gentiles received the Spirit without the laying on of hands or a delay, and yet the church remained unified.

The answer for why the Samaritans did not receive the Spirit until the apostles came down comes from examining Luke's own focus on the Holy Spirit in his two volume work Luke/Acts. Stronstad develops the view that Luke is an independent theologian in his work *The Charismatic*


Theology of St. Luke. If this is true, then it may be an improper method to interpret Luke with Pauline eyes. "The methodology whereby Luke is read as though he were Paul presses him into the Pauline mold and strips him of his independence as a theologian in his own right." If indeed he is independent of Paul, then Luke's own focus is of primary importance for understanding the theology of the Holy Spirit in Luke/Acts.

An examination of Luke's focus reveals that his writing lacks any definite connection between the Holy Spirit and regeneration. He simply does not develop the connection the way Paul does. Instead Luke focusses on the empowering Spirit, who gives men gifts of prophecy, tongues, healing and boldness. As Stronstad states:

For Luke, the gift of the Spirit has a vocational purpose and equips the disciple for service. Thus, it is devoid of any soteriological connotations and, contra Dunn, it does not mean that "it is God's giving of the Spirit which makes a man a Christian."

Certainly Acts 1:8 supports this contention: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Here, the stress is not upon the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit, but upon the power that the Spirit will give for service.

Finally, an examination of Luke's focus shows that believers need to wait and pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit. In Luke 24.49 Jesus commands his disciples: "I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." Acts 1.4 repeats this command, and then chapter 2.1f describes the falling of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, which probably occurred about seven days after Jesus' command. Thus, the original disciples might not have thought it so strange for believers to have to wait for a while before the Holy Spirit would descend on them.

Furthermore, in Luke 11:1-13 Luke records Jesus' teaching on prayer. At one point Jesus says, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." Luke uses the Greek present tense with these imperatives throughout (ask, seek and knock), giving a strong indication that what Jesus expects is a consistent, durative prayer. The end

---

10 Ibid., p. 11.
11 Ibid., p. 64. He quotes from Dunn, op. cit., p. 68.
of the discourse says: "If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask [or "keep asking"] him?" Thus, Luke teaches that those who would receive the gift of the Father, the Holy Spirit, need to ask, seek, and knock continually, until they receive, until they find, and until the door is opened to them.

Finally, Luke shows Acts 8.15 that the apostle's prayed the Samaritans: "When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit." Here is a clause the significance of which many tend to overlook. When the apostle's came down they did not correct Philip for baptizing those who failed to receive the Spirit because they were not Christians, but rather, they prayed that the Samaritans would also receive power for the work of ministry through the falling of the Holy Spirit upon them. It may be that these people were waiting and seeking for the Holy Spirit's empowerment, because Philip may have told them that this was how he was able to do miracles of healing and exorcism. In Acts 4.23-31 Luke records another prayer of the disciples in which they pray for boldness and power. God answered their prayer (vs. 31): "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly." Thus, Luke not only teaches about praying for the Holy Spirit in his gospel, but in Acts he also illustrates times when God answered prayers for the Holy Spirit.

So Luke does focus on waiting and praying for the power of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, he does not develop a doctrine of regeneration by the Spirit as Paul does. Acts 8:4-25 should not present a problem, but indeed, it is in keeping with the Luke's focus. Therefore, the Samaritans did not lack the regenerative work of Spirit, because Luke describes them as genuine Christians; but what they did lack, and what they needed to wait and pray for, was the power of the Holy Spirit.