

Session #8: Acts Chapter 8

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The Persecution of the Church 8:1b-3

What we now move to in chapter eight is the deepening of the persecution of the Church. What was once done just against the leadership of this fledgling community now fans out to all its

membership. While we have no scriptural basis for this, some scholars submit the idea that this persecution was limited to the Hellenist Jews of the Freedman Synagogue since it is very probable this is the home Church of St. Stephen. This suggestion comes because of the statement at the end of verse one that says *all were scattered... except the Apostles*.

8:1 they are all scattered

What does one do when one's life is threatened? Most move to safety and in this case that means leaving Jerusalem. So these first Christians run to Judea and Samaria. We learn later in Acts (11:19) they go to Phoenicia, Syria and Antioch. The amazing thing is rather than driving these believers into hiding this movement brings about a new phase of missionary activity for the early Church (8:4). We should not assume that these men and women left Jerusalem out of fear (although we can be sure that preserving life was a big part of it). Scholars suggest that, in the eyes of faith, we can believe that most realized that evangelizing as many as they could was to be the core of their life for the remainder of their life. Seeing the writing on the wall they understood that if they were to carry out their calling now was as good a time as any to be about the business of God in safer lands.

except the Apostles

So why were the Apostles left alone? One theory was offered in the introductory comments to this section, but there is another idea as well. Some scholars suggest it goes back to what the great rabbi Gamaliel advised the Sanhedrin to do in Acts 5:38 – to leave these men alone and allow time to determine whether this movement is of God or not.

8:3 Saul... was trying to destroy the church

So who is Saul/Paul? He was born in the city of Tarsus, in the southeastern corner of modern day Turkey. From the Letter to the Romans (11:1) and Philippians (3:5) we know that Saul/Paul was from the tribe of Benjamin. As a student he studied under the great Rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 22:3) and therefore we can surmise was a Pharisee. Finally, we know that Saul/Paul was a Roman citizen (Acts 22:25-27). In this moment of the story of faith Saul/Paul is a zealot for the "true" Jewish faith and sees these Christians as a threat. So he does what he can to destroy the community. The words in Greek used are translated to "made havoc" and give the image of a wild boar ravaging. Paul was out for blood.

Philip Proclaims the Gospel in Samaria 8:5-8

With the Christians leaving Jerusalem we move into the second stage of the development of the early Church. First we have the gift of the Holy Spirit and those first converts. Second is the leaving from the city walls of Jerusalem. State three will be the founding of the Church in Antioch (Syria).

8:5 Philip

We first met Philip in Chapter 6. He is one of the seven selected as the first Deacons of the Church. Later in Acts 8 we will hear of Philip meeting an important Ethiopian eunuch to whom he proclaimed the truth of Jesus Christ, converting and baptizing him. In chapter 21 we read of St. Paul (accompanied by St. Luke) going up to Jerusalem for the last time. St. Paul stops in Caesarea and spends several days with Philip. It is believed by scholarship how St. Luke came to know of the conversion story of the Ethiopian eunuch and other elements of the early chapters of Acts.

city of Samaria

Samaria was the capital city of what was the Northern Kingdom of Israel of the Old Testament times. After the conquest by the Assyrians in 8 BC most of the Israelites were taken as slaves. Those who remained in the area intermarried with Assyrians. Those Jews who intermarried took on Assyrian religious practice interweaving them with their Jewish rituals and became known as Samaritans. The Jews despised the Samaritans for their in-pure blood and the Samaritans disliked the Jews for their arrogance.

8:6 gave heed to what he said

It is interesting to note that Jesus and the Apostles were not welcomed in a Samaritan village (Luke 9:51-53) but here we have Philip received and all interested in what he has to say. It is the despised Samaritans who become the first to benefit from the Gospel. Without planning it these early Christians are taking an important step away from the Jewish community by preaching to one and all.

Simon the Magician 8:9-25

Here we have a curious story about a magician named Simon. One could wonder why this story was even included. Scholars suggest the reason is to show that the miraculous gifts of Peter and the early community was not to be confused with the magic of sorcerers. Magicians/witches/sorcerers have been common throughout the ages and people seeking to have influence or power flock to such individuals. Moses forbade the practice of such things and any Jew who sought them out was excommunicated from the faith community. The Samaritans, who had Jewish heritage but had intermarried, while worshipping God had incorporated other rituals and beliefs into their religious lives over the ages.

8:9 a man named Simon

What we know about this man is only found in the bible but there are those traditions that have been handed down. What began as a career entertaining the crowds with simple tricks turned into being worshiped as a god. Christian tradition identifies Simon as the father of heretics and the founder of Gnosticism. (Gnosticism is the belief that the world was created and ruled by a lesser gods, and that Christ was a representative of the remote supreme divine being.) There are those who believe that Simon's teachings eventually reached Rome where a statue was created in Simon's honor.

8:10 which is called Great

Scholars are unsure as to the meaning of this phrase. Are they calling the power by a name "Great"? Is the power great? Some scholars suggest that the

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Greek word used here “megale” is not actually Greek but a transcription of an Aramaic word meaning “revealing”. Whatever the meaning Simon claimed to have divine power.

8:14 Samaria had received the word of God

The circle of faith continues to move outward. Peter and John go to examine, to check out that what is happening here is of God and to bring these new members into the family of faith. It is interesting that when Jesus walked the earth Samaria would not have him. Read Luke 9:51-56

8:16 had not fallen upon them

It is interesting we should see a separation from the gift of baptism, which bestows the gift the Holy Spirit in an invisible way and the laying on of hands (which the Bishop does to this day). It is the laying on of hands which calls down the Holy Spirit to manifest his presence in a visible way in the life of the Christian. It will happen again in Acts 10:44-48 and 19:1-6. Scholars offer that St. Luke want to make a distinction between these two moments and out of that grows the theology of the separate sacraments of baptism and confirmation. Baptism brings us into the faith community and confirmation (the bestowing of the Holy Spirit) empowers us to serve the Church and share the gospel to our wider world.

8:18 offered them money

There are those who believe they can buy anything given the right amount of money. Simon wanted this power to be able to call down God’s spirit into the life of others and tries to buy it. His interest? Not in the holy but in the power he would have given he had that ability. To this day we call the sin of buying and selling church authority, sacrament, indulgence, church office or things with “special” power given by God *Simony*.

8:20 May your money perish with you

While material wealth is not bad within itself St. Luke wants us to understand we cannot buy our way into heaven or into faith.

Philip and the Ethiopian 8:26-40

The spread of the gospel continues as we hear in this section of Philip leading an Ethiopian to accept Jesus.

8:26 to the road

This was a road that ran southwest from Jerusalem to the coastal city of Gaza. Gaza was one of the last places to find people and supplies before the desert that stretched between Gaza and Egypt.

8:27 a eunuch

It was common practice of royalty to castrate those males who guarded the women of the palace. This eunuch must have shown himself very worthy to move from the security of the harem to the treasurer of the kingdom.



court official of the Candace

Candace is not a name but a title for the Ethiopian queen.

had come to Jerusalem to worship

There were many who believed in the one true God and Judaism had admirers and believers from all

walks of life. Not all would adhere themselves to all the principles and guidelines that the Jews lived out.

8:30 heard him reading It was common practice to read out loud when reading.

8:32-33 As a sheep is led to the slaughter What the Eunuch is reading is from the prophet Isaiah (53:7-8). This small piece comes from what is called to the "Suffering Servant" and can be read in it's entirety Isaiah 52:13-53:12. It describes the rejection, humiliation and murder of the Messiah by his own generation. It speaks of how this servant of God willingly pours out his life as a sacrifice for the redemption from sin of all of humanity.

8:35 then Philip opened his mouth Philip takes this opportunity and teaches the Eunuch all about what was foretold in the Old Testament and was fulfilled in the New through Jesus Christ.

8:37 (*) Some of our bibles will show this apteryx for verse 37 that is because scholars believe this verse was added in later in the centuries by some well intention monk. *And Philip said, 'If you believe with all your heart, you may'. And he said in rely, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.'* The oldest manuscripts do not have this verse.

8:39 the Spirit of the Lord caught up Philip We are to understand that once Philip had completed his mission with the Eunuch he disappeared and was relocated back to his home. These moments of miraculous disappearance happened before in the Old Testament by the prophet Elijah (1 Kings 18:12; 2 Kings 2:16)

Went on his way Irenaeus was a second century saint and according to his writings the eunuch returned home to Ethiopia and established the first Christian community there.

A word about our responsibility to Evangelize, to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. We read in the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

Lay people also fulfill their prophetic mission by evangelization, "that is, the proclamation of Christ by word and the testimony of life." For lay people, "this evangelization . . . acquires a specific property and peculiar efficacy because it is accomplished in the ordinary circumstances of the world." This witness of life, however, is not the sole element in the apostolate; the true apostle is on the lookout for occasions of announcing Christ by word, either to unbelievers . . . or to the faithful. (Catechism #905)

We come from a world in which there was no need to share the faith with neighbor and friend because almost everybody believed and we often lived in communities of shared doctrine – Italian, Polish, Catholic, Jew or Protestant. And in those places where the gospel was not known we depended on the priests, brothers and sisters to take the faith to the dark recesses of the world. With telecommunications there are very few dark recesses and even if there were more there are fewer and fewer ordained and/or religious to support that missionary work. Besides we experience

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more and more people leaving the faith. They are often seduced by the wide variety of distractions as well as support from family, friends and neighbors who themselves have walked away from Church practice. From the beginning of the Christian faith, as we see in Peter, John and today Philip we have been meant to share the faith with those we encounter. We may not have an angel directing our efforts but all the same it is a part of our baptismal call and fortified at confirmation and each week in the Eucharist.

For the How to SEE Article: What is the New Evangelization? By Greg Willis

Reflection Questions:

1. What do you think is the difference between magic and miracles?
2. When and by what was the last time you were amazed at what God had done?
3. What are your thoughts about the idea of sharing your faith with others? Fears?

Catechism of the Catholic Church

Confirmation: 1286-1289

Who can Minister Confirmation: 1312-1321

The Sin of Simony: 2121

Divinization and Magic: 2115-2117

Evangelization: 848-851, 905

Bibliography:

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- The Navarre Bible: Acts of the Apostles
- New Collegeville Bible Commentary: The Acts of the Apostles by Dennis Hamm
- Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: Acts of the Apostles by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch
- Agape Bible Study: Gospel of Luke by Michal Hunt. Agapebiblestudy.com
- Acts: The Spread of the Kingdom by Jeff Cavins and Sarah Christmyer