

PERSECUTION LEADING TO EXPANSION

Acts 8

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We're at Acts 8, verse 1. We're going to take the eighth chapter of Acts this evening. As we've been walking along through the Book of Acts we find ourselves in the second major section of this work, which is a two-volume work written by Luke, the Gospel being the first volume, Acts being the second. The first five chapters of Acts deal with the birth of the church in Jerusalem. Then Acts 6 through 9:31 really deal with the theme "Persecution Leading to Expansion."

I want you to take a moment to notice where Luke is going. At the end of this section, in Acts 9:31, the phrase is used "then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria..." just that phrase. There had never been a church in Judea, Galilee and Samaria until the events that occur in Acts 6,7,8, and the first half of chapter 9. Although the revival and the turn to Christ had been tremendous in Jerusalem (Acts 1-5), the church had stayed within its cultural walls of Jerusalem, practice of faith and had not expanded in spite of Acts 1:8, the command of the Lord to go into all the world. The church had not done that. And we will find, as we look at this particular chapter, that the Lord is using a means to stir the church out of its cozy nest and help it to fulfill the Great Commission.

We also should notice a technique that Luke has as a writer. One of the things that I always like to look at, when I'm looking at Scripture, is the literary devices that are being employed, because sometimes we—I don't think—get as much out of the Bible as we could by failing to approach it as a literary masterpiece also. And Luke is a tremendous writer. He has to cover thirty-five years of history in a very short time. Acts has 28 chapters. It's not that long of a scroll, really. If you could imagine writing the last thirty-five years of the Christian church in a readable fashion that

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would not only inform you but inspire your faith for two thousand years. That's a formidable task. How he does that, literally, as the Spirit inspires him, is always intriguing to watch. He has picked up a keynote of the Lord, who didn't deal with abstract ideas but who kept returning to concrete illustrations. Luke, for example, in the first chapters, notes several times that great signs and wonders were being done through the hands of the apostles. Yet out of all the signs and wonders being done, he only keys in on one. That is, Acts 3, the healing of the man who is lame. The reason why he keys in on it is that it is a hinge kind of moment. It leads somewhere else. It's not just a miracle standing by itself, so we can ohh and ahhh and say, "Wasn't that great?" But it's a miracle that is a bridge to a succeeding series of events that open up the future of the church. When he talks, for example, of how everybody was giving everything and laying it at the apostles' feet, he immediately comes back and focuses on individual events. He keys in on the gift of Ananias and Sapphira, and contrasts it with the gift of Barnabas from Cyprus. In seeing the contrast of those two gifts, he notes for us pure and impure giving.

Now he's concerned to note the growth of the church through Judea, Galilee and Samaria. In doing so, rather than telling us everything that happened because he doesn't have time for that, he just keys in on three personalities. In chapter 6 and 7, he keys in on Stephen. In chapter 8, he keys in on the personality of Philip. And in the early part of chapter 8 and then in chapter 9, he keys in on the personality of Saul. It's these three people who are most responsible for the period of time where persecution is leading to expansion.

Our Scripture begins in Acts 8:1, with Saul standing there, giving approval of the death. Some take this as a reference to the idea that Saul was a member of the Sanhedrin, the highest ruling body of Israel at the time. This Scripture, however, is not strong enough to lay that claim. It simply says he was giving approval. It didn't ever say that he cast a vote. Perhaps the best

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indication that he may have been a member of the Sanhedrin is found later in Acts 26, when he is giving, thirty years down the road, his testimony to King Agrippa, who was very knowledgeable in Jewish matters. He said to Agrippa, when he was on trial before him at Caesarea, “When they brought Christians before us, I cast my vote against them” (Acts 26:10). In which case, if he is meaning by that he was casting his vote as a participating member of the ruling group, it would have placed him in the counsel of the seventy, a very important group in Jewish history.

“On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered through Judea and Samaria” (Acts 8:1, NIV). That is, all the people who were in responsible places of leadership were scattered. This raises an intriguing question. Why weren’t the apostles also scattering? Wasn’t it more dangerous for them than anybody else? It seems to be a logical assumption. Yes, it was more dangerous for them than anybody else because they were leaders. Yet they stayed.

There are two ways of looking at that particular matter of their staying. One is the viewpoint that they stayed because the shepherd does not desert the flock when it is under pressure. They are going to testify to their solidarity with God’s suffering people by remaining under pressure. This may have been the reason.

There’s another thing that we shouldn’t lose sight of in the text. If you’ll allow me to be a little heretical and off the wall, perhaps you’ve not considered this before. But I have noted earlier that the first persecution against the church that resulted in a death (the death of Stephen) did not come because Stephen was preaching the Resurrection. Others had preached the Resurrection. The apostles, on an earlier occasion, had been put into prison for preaching the Resurrection and had even been flogged for preaching the Resurrection. But ultimately, they were released and they went right back to doing the same thing. So the particular thing that impels the persecution

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of Stephen and his death is not just that he was preaching the Resurrection, but that he was adding to the preaching of the resurrection the implication of Christ's life and ministry, namely, that if indeed He has risen, what are we still doing going to the Temple? And what are we still doing trying to keep the Law of Moses and its ritualistic demands? Him speaking against the Law in this place is the charge against him. What Stephen was doing was reading out the implications of faith.

It's very apparent that the apostles were not yet at that point in their preaching. They were not doing the kind of thing Stephen was doing in the Synagogue of the Freedmen, disputing the theological or practical implications of the gospel as applied to everyday routines. They were not saying anything about the kosher diet. They were not saying anything about abolishing temple practices. They were not encouraging people to stay away from the temple. They were not encouraging them to keep away from the minutiae of the Sabbath day observances. They had simply added to their Judaic faith the belief that Jesus had risen from the dead. But Christianity, at that moment, was still very much encapsulated or enculturated within its Jewishness. And Stephen is beginning to bust out of that and proclaim a gospel that will be welcomed in the world by the Gentiles. A gospel that goes beyond the law and this place, that is, the temple.

So it may be that one of the reasons why the apostles and the Hellenized deacons (remember all the deacons had Greek names) can't stay in Jerusalem, why they must leave, is that they—being younger—tend to have a more radicalized view of their faith. They are seeing deeper into the dimensions of it. And since they are the ones—the Hellenistic faction of the church—which have been largely responsible for this persecution because they preached Christ in such a way that Stephen got killed, they have to get out. But the apostles, because of pastoral responsibilities and

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also because they are still living within their Jewishness, can remain in Jerusalem without getting killed.

That situation will change as we go through Acts. Ultimately, they're all going to have to get out. But here they're not; they're staying with the flock.

It's the next deacon in line, Philip, who gets out of Jerusalem and gets up to Samaria. By the way, chapter 8 is about the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Do things ever change over the years? Absolutely never! The West Bank was occupied then, as it is now, by non-Jews. In those days, they were called Samaritans. The Samaritans were actually people who descended from the northern tribes. Remember Israel had ten northern tribes. And then the split after Solomon, under his son, Rehoboam, and then Jeroboam split away from Rehoboam and Jeroboam founded the kingdom of Israel in contrast to the kingdom of Judah. Judah had the Davidic line, and David's successors ruled there. But up in Israel, from about 931 to 722 B.C., for a period of two centuries there was the northern kingdom, which was very much into idolatry and heathen practices and tried to merge some of these practices with Judaic faith. In 722, when the Assyrians came, they captured the north. They didn't capture Judah. Judah would stand for another hundred and fifty years. But Assyria went under. After Assyria was long gone and they had taken away captives, the Jewish people that remained in the land intermarried from the ten tribes, with people in the land that were non-Jews. Gradually, one of the groups that emerged from that was the Samaritan group, which retained some vestiges of their Judaic faith but had mixed into that other practices like having a temple on Mount Gerazim and having their own sacrificial system and their own priesthood. Because they were, so to speak, theological half-breeds and ethical half-breeds in the eye of a good Jewish person, they were outside. It's the same attitude that Pentecostals have toward hard-shelled Baptists, to put it in the vernacular. The West Bank is not the West Bank of

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a river. It's a massive territory that's almost as big as the country of Israel itself today. Here in Samaria, as you go north of Jerusalem, about ten miles out of Jerusalem is the ancient city of Ramallah.

If you look at Matthew 10:5, you'll find that when the Lord sends the disciples out on their first training mission, He's going to have them proclaim the good news for the very first time; one of the limitations He places upon them is, "Don't go among the Samaritans or the Gentiles." That seems kind of a strange command from the Lord who, eighteen chapters later, in Matthew 28, will tell the very same disciples, "Go unto all the world." But here, early on, the first year of their discipleship, He's saying to them, "Don't go to the Samaritans." It doesn't take us long to understand why He says that. In Luke 9, Jesus is going through Samaria and one of the villages was inhospitable to Him because He was going up to Jerusalem, to the temple. They weren't going to help a person going to a rival worship site or a rival shrine. So they refused Him hospitality. Two of the disciples have a response that is very interesting, "Jesus, send down fire and burn them up!" Now we understand why Jesus told them not to go to Samaria. They were not ready to preach the gospel of love and reconciliation. They were ready to preach a message of damnation and judgment.

When Jesus found the disciples, they were sort of like Jimmy the Greek. They were extremely off base in their racial ideas of other people and in their prejudices. And rather than cutting them out of the action altogether, Jesus sends them, first of all, against whom they do not have racial or theological biases, and begins to train them in that ground. Jesus, when we begin following Him, doesn't necessarily change all of our thinking overnight. The changing of our thinking is a lifelong maturation process. Certainly the disciples are going to have to rethink Samaritans as the church grows. But Jesus, at the beginning, didn't say, "I'm going to put everything on your plate.

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You've got to rethink everything." He kind of leads them incrementally. I think He's doing that with you and me. I've known some bigoted persons in my lifetime who the Lord was working on and changed. It doesn't mean that because they were bigoted they weren't believers, but they were going to have to grow out of that bigotries if they were going to be effective for the Lord. Philip is one who is comfortable in going to Samaria. He gets there, up in the central mountain range of Israel. He proclaims the Messiah there, and the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous things he did. Here again is this development in the life of a disciple. Like Stephen, Philip starts out by waiting on tables—not as a chef or maître d at a table, but at the tables of the money changers, dispersing the welfare funds. He starts out at that level of his Christian service, then an opportunity arises and he's ready to do more. I found that, sometimes, the development of our own life in ministry is like that. If we simply present ourselves in willingness to the Lord, He is able to guide us. If you had asked Philip, when he was appointed deacon, "Is it your goal to go to Samaria and be an evangelist?" He didn't have a target plan for his life. He didn't have an overarching goal of where he was going. It was just at that moment that he was available to God. I'm convinced that, in our management area, where we've always got to be goal-oriented and this kind of thing, there has got to be room within our spiritual experience for non-goal-oriented kinds of living. Not that I'm against planning. But on the other hand, there has to be that aspect to us that lives free and is willing to go where the Spirit is willing to blow us. Someone has said, "You can't guide a bicycle that's standing still." So if you want to know the will of God for your life, get in motion. Do something. Don't just sit there and do nothing in your Christian experience. Get going and God will guide you.

Philip was doing this. All of a sudden, he was not only serving the welfare money, he was preaching the good news at Samaria, then miracles started happening through him. Philip is the

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first specialized evangelist in the history of the church. Notice the miracles and signs that are happening through his ministry are not general in nature. They are very specific. Two kinds—casting out demons is one of them. There’s an explanation for that. There was a man who had dominant power in the city of Samaria, by the name of Simon the magician. He was very comfortable working with the cultic-like things, although he himself never appears to be demon-possessed. (And by the way, a sorcerer or witch can accomplish their work and not necessarily be possessed by the devil. In fact, in Galatians 5, sorcery is listed, not necessarily as a demonic thing, but as a work of the flesh. Here is a person who is involved in the occult who himself is not possessed. But a great many people in that are possessed.) So the evil spirits are coming out of them with great shouts—the NIV uses the word “shrieks.” It’s the idea of tremendous energy. You can hear them as they’re coming out. That’s one aspect of his ministry.

The second specialized aspect of his ministry is to paralytics and cripples. Notice it doesn’t say that anyone who had any kind of disease was coming to him and was healed, like in Matthew and Mark where Jesus’ ministry goes through a whole category of the types of illnesses that came to Jesus. Philip evidently has a specialized gift of healing, a specialized gift of faith.

I’ve seen people like this. We all laugh at leg lengtheners. There have been a lot of those charlatans in the body of Christ. But, on the other hand, there have been genuine healings where a leg has been lengthened.

Philip evidently has a specialized gift of faith for people who are paralyzed and lame, and those people are being healed. No other category of illnesses is mentioned. Just that category.

So there was great joy in that city. Verse 1 says “a great persecution.” Verse 2 says, “great mourning” for Stephen. And verse 8 says “great joy.” We must remember that when we go through great sorrow. If we will stick with the Lord in that time of great sorrow and let Him lead

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us to the next step, as He did Philip. Philip had to feel that great mourning for his close friend and compatriot in the faith, Stephen. But it isn't long before Philip, who keeps walking with the Lord, is thrust into an experience that he would not have been in had it not been for Stephen's death. Now Philip is in Samaria. As a result of his being in Samaria, there is great joy. So the great mourning is followed by great joy, because someone is being true to the Lord in the midst of their mourning. The great mourning becomes great joy.

Now we get into the manner of simony. It was a huge problem for the church in the Middle Ages, the whole practice of buying an ecclesiastical office for money, the highest bidder. It was one of the things that Luther protested against. The word "simony" describes anyone who attempts to use material things in the body of Christ. ("I gave X amount of dollars to this church over the years. My voice should count for something.") That's simony. Attempting to use your financial resources or your political pull to pull the church in a direction or to gain, somehow, a merit or standing for yourself on the basis of a non-spiritual contribution. Simon will wind up wanting to buy the gift of the Holy Spirit. He practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people in Samaria. There are real Satanic works, obviously.

I have, in my possession, an artifact of Tibetan demonic worship. It is a human thighbone. In Tibetan worship, which is very occultist, and I know in the west the Dali Lama looks like a civilized person but there is no religion in the world that is more into the occult and demon possession than the religion that is headed by the Dali Lama. It's one of the spookiest, most dangerous things going in terms of the occult. In Tibetan practice and religion, there comes a point where a whole community might be in special need, such as during a time of drought, when there are no answers to the conditions. Finally, as a last resort, a young lady, a virgin, has to offer herself to go up a mountainside and jump down. A Tibetan priest will, before the

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vultures get the body, cut out the thighbone and make it into an instrument that is used in a religious ceremony, to be blown and to summon the evil spirits. Whenever that has been practiced, according to people familiar with that particular practice, there has always been rain or there has always been answer to prayer. There are miraculous things that happen in regard to the occult. It was a priest who became a Christian who gave that particular bone to my father. Ultimately, when he passed it on, it came to me and we have sanctified it through prayer, so there's nothing spooky hanging around it now. Actually, it passed to my brother. He got so shaken up that he sent it to me. There are powerful things that happen in the evil realm.

Simon “boasted that he was someone great, and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, ‘This man is the divine power known as the Great Power.’ They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic. But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw” (Acts 8:9-13, NIV). When the Lord is working, His signs far exceed those signs of the occult. “When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them” (verse 14, NIV). Notice how, therefore, the church of Samaria was not begun as a direct result of Acts 1:8, “Go ye.” The reaching of Samaria had occurred somewhat “accidentally.”

Because there was the death of Stephen, there was persecution. Because there was persecution, Philip wound up in Samaria, seeking safety, and while he was there, he began to preach. Now, however, there has come into existence a bona fide body of believers—non-Jews, half-Jews, Samaritans who had been baptized. The Jerusalem church gets the word and asks, “What is

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going on up there?” and if there is a church up there, and God is indeed at work, then it must be linked with ours.

We, by the way, have lived in the last generation in an era which I call the “vogue” or the “popularity” of non-denominational or independent ministries. Especially in Southern California, where we’re all free spirits. There was a church I know of called “The Church of the Free Spirit.” Everybody wanted to be a free spirit in the church, no accountability to one another. I think the idea of independence of churches or individual Christians is foreign to the New Testament.

There is interdependency in the body. Not that there’s hierarchy. Not that there is rigid denominationalism or anything like that. But there is always an interdependence of church with church, just as there is an interdependence of Christian with Christian.

The Jerusalem church said, “If there is a church in Samaria, we’ve got to be linked to it. It’s not going to exist without us being aware of it.” So there’s now this sending of a fact-finding commission, headed by Peter and John, to see what was going on. The importance of it is attested by the fact that they sent Peter and John—the number one and number two apostles.

When they arrived—a good thing for the investigative committee to do first—they prayed. They prayed that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet fallen upon any one of them, they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. As we encounter Acts, this is the second incident in which people receive the baptism of the Spirit. We have believers who have not been baptized in the Holy Spirit or believers whose faith is attested sufficiently and has been marked and witnessed by water baptism, yet there is a subsequent experience called “the falling of the Spirit upon them” or “the reception of the Spirit.” Is it possible for a person to be a Christian and not have the Spirit of God? No, it’s not possible. When you’re born again, the Spirit is breathed into you (the regenerating life of God). But the

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baptism in the Spirit is a subsequent work and different from the indwelling of the Spirit at conversion. And it's here, at the Samaritan experience. These believers had come to the Lord and yet they had not received this experience of enablement and empowerment that the Lord had promised, and the early disciples had received in Acts 2.

So what happens? The apostles prayed. We're not told how long Peter and John prayed. Was it just a cursory prayer or was it an intensive time of prayer? Was it a series of prayer meetings, where they began to lay out for them the importance for these new believers of really getting energized and empowered of the Spirit? How do you bring a person in a very quick amount of time to a tremendous acceleration of their faith in Christ? If you're coming in from the outside and you don't know anything about the Lord, anything about the Bible, do you get popped into a school for six hours a day for three years for a cram-course of Christianity? The Holy Spirit has a quick acceleration process for people coming into the body of Christ who are very non-knowledgeable about His person and work. The Holy Spirit wants to tap them into a deep well of their inner experience. That's where He wants to reach us. It's not sufficient that we only have made kind of an intellectual commitment, or a volitional movement in our life. We need to be immersed in the Spirit's presence and power. We need something in our experience that is unshakable that we can walk away with saying, "I met God. You can never talk me out of that experience." So these believers are stepping into that kind of thing.

A new phenomenon occurs here. It doesn't always occur when the baptism is mentioned, but Peter and John placed their hands on them as they prayed for them and they received the Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament, the laying on of hands was in a different direction than New Testament laying on of hands. I mean, when you have laying on of hands in the Old Testament, the most common usage was a person laying a hand on a sacrifice. And by that, they were

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transferring their sin to a pure object, thereby, that pure object became a representation that animal was an atonement for sacrifice. The impurity draining out of us, going into them. In the New Testament, the laying on of hands is not the laying on of impure hands onto something that is better, but it is the laying on of hands of a person that's filled with the power and might of God, and that energy, that power, that life of God which is in them is now being transferred to people who are without power, without the Spirit, and without the deeper consequence of the Lord's work in their life. It's important when there is a laying on of hands that those are not empty hands and those heads are not empty heads. Someone has said that ordination is sometimes like that: the empty hands of the bishop being laid on the empty heads of the candidate. If there's no spiritual vitality in a person's life, the laying on of hands is just ritualistic. So it's incumbent upon those who lay on hands that they be in a place of dynamic relation with God. And those who receive, be in a position of tremendous hunger and openness to God. When that combination occurs, God is at work doing His thing.

These people are filled with the Spirit. There's no mention here made of other tongues. We'll make note of that as we continue to observe other cases of the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts and see why perhaps that is omitted here.

Obviously, something happened, however, when the laying on of hands occurred. Because Simon saw that the Spirit given. "Saw." That's an objective, empirical quality. He didn't think, he didn't feel that something was going on. He saw something happening and we're not told what he saw in the Book of Acts. We're just told that he saw it. He saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands and he offered them money saying, "Give me also this ability" (Acts 8:19, NIV). If all that he saw was people breaking out in a bigger smile, then when they first came, it's doubtful that he would have wanted to buy the art of giving a smile to

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someone. There was something happening here that was so out of the ordinary in terms of its manifestation that Simon was saying, "I'll pay good money for that." Notice that Simon had already seen demons leaving people and he had seen paralytics and cripples healed and he had not wanted to buy those abilities. So whatever is happening here is of sufficient weight to awaken Simon's interest beyond the desire to buy a gift to heal somebody. So we have to lay some emphasis on the importance of what is going on that would have caused him to loosen his wallet to get whatever that gift was.

There was some observable phenomena taking place in people's lives. In addition to that, Peter saw that something was happening under Peter and John's ministry that had not happened under Philip's ministry. Philip had not laid hands upon people, and they had not received this Holy Spirit under Philip's ministry. It was obvious that Simon, being a practical person who was just new in the faith, brought a lot of his secular mentality with him. It's obvious, by looking at the pecking order, that Peter and John had the capability to do something that for whatever reason Philip hadn't. They were in a higher position of status. What had happened to Simon is that when Philip came to town, he got bumped as the number one guy. He was no longer the number one honcho in the area. Philip is now. And when Philip is visited by Peter and John, he gives deference to them. So Simon is saying "If I can get whatever Peter and John are doing that Philip isn't doing, I will regain my place and once more be over Philip." So he's looking for prestige right away.

That problem emerges in the body of Christ: people looking for position in the church in order to throw their weight around and be acclaimed as someone. Peter isn't too kind with him. He's not very diplomatic. Philip translated this and probably comes as close to the original as anybody, "To hell with you and your money," is what he tells them. "Your money perish with you and

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may you go to destruction” (Acts 8:20). Peter said to him, “You thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps He will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin” (Acts 8:20–23, NIV).

These little verses do a lot to undermine the extreme doctrine of eternal security that says “once you become a believer and are baptized, you don’t have to worry about anything.” Peter threatens him with damnation. And he’s saved, isn’t he? Isn’t he declared a believer? Isn’t he described as someone who is baptized? Yet Peter says that this is the kind of unregenerate life you were living before you became a Christian. “You keep that up and it’s going to dominate you again.” Simon answered, “Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me” (Acts 8:24, NIV). No one knows how sincerely he said that. It would have been nicer if he’d said, “I repent, and may the Lord forgive me,” and done the praying himself. But no judgment is made of his personality, just the threat is there. And the threat is always there, because we must be careful in the body of Christ that those who serve in places of leadership and responsibility serve in those places because of their spiritual calling and because of the Lord’s calling, and not because they did something that from a human point of view gave them the opportunity to throw their weight around, whether it be length of tenure (“I’ve been here X number of years!”), amount of money given (“If it weren’t for me, this church wouldn’t be”), or amount of volunteer service rendered (“You can always count on me. Other people have flaked out and because of that, I deserve such-and-such.”). That is all wrapped up in the spirit of simony.

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When Peter and John had testified and proclaimed the Word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages. Now they're starting to kick free. They had never preached in a Samaritan village until they had gone up to wherever Philip was, and now they've had a taste of it, reaching people that were different from themselves, ethnically and spiritually, and they began to expand. That's how the Holy Spirit works. So often He works in increments. They're not ready to tackle the world. But this is the halfway house of the expansion, culturally, of the disciples' ability to witness to people who are not of their small, cozy group. It's an incremental expansion of that ministry.

It's like most of us would have lousy success going out and witnessing to punk rockers. We don't know the language. The hairstyle may put us off. The Holy Spirit knows that. He has people that are witnessing to punk rockers. And He may give you an opportunity. I'm not suggesting that because you don't feel comfortable you shouldn't witness. But I'm saying there is a point that God makes you ready.

Chuck Smith, for example. The great story of the growth of Calvary Chapel. Chuck and Kay, in the early sixties, were down at the beach one day, just praying for kids. Their heart just broke for the lost generation. A few days later, Chuck was driving along, there was a young kid hitchhiking on the road that didn't look anything like Chuck. He picked him up, witnessed to him, brought him to the Lord. That was the whole beginning of the Jesus movement. He was praying, and open to bridging a cultural barrier. The church must always be careful to not settle down in kind of a comfy role that says, "We'll only witness to people who look like us, think like us, act like us." God is going to be using people who are getting further out and reaching people who are unlike us.

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Philip is not only a mass evangelist. He is a personal evangelist. So Luke gives us two stories—one is the story of mass evangelism at Samaria. The other the story is of personal, individual evangelism on the road of Gaza, the Ethiopian eunuch. Philip, I'm sure, being an evangelist when the Lord pulled him out of Samaria, could have complained, "I've never had a meeting like this in my life. Every time I preach, there are people getting delivered and healed and now the Spirit is being outpoured after Peter and John have come. I can't leave. Where do You want me to go?" The Lord says, "I've got in mind that you go talk to one person." "But Lord! I've just gotten established and I've got a big work."

There are some people who think in numbers. One time, I was trying to get a particular person to come hold a revival meeting at the church a number of years ago. They really did have a genuine ministry of healing. At that time, our sanctuary sat about a hundred and eighty people. They asked how many the sanctuary seated. I told them. They said, "We do not go to any church building that seats less than a thousand." I asked why. They answered, "Because large crowds are needed to build our faith and God doesn't work as well in a small crowd." In a sense, it's true. When we have a whole lot of people, somehow our faith is let go more easily. You come to a prayer meeting where there's just three or four and use the Scripture verse "Wherever two or three are gathered together..." (Matthew 18:20), which is an excuse for a poor crowd in a Christian sense. There's not a lot of faith released. I understood what they were saying, but it bugged me.

Philip was ready to go witness to the one. The Lord says, "I've got in mind that you go talk to one person." Philip was ready to go witness to the one. The Lord told him to go witness to one and he wasn't worried about crowds. "'Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch" (Acts

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8:26-27, NIV). Ethiopia was south of Egypt. Ethiopian carries the connotation of this being a black person, because Ethiopia was inhabited by black people, then and now. It's an African country. "An important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship" (verse 27, NIV). He'd not gone on a state visit, not gone on a trade mission, not gone on an economic recovery act on how to reduce the national debt of Ethiopia or to help Israel politically whatever. He had gone to worship.

He should have come to somebody who could have helped him and told him, "Don't go to Jerusalem. There are several strikes against you. You're not a Jew. You can't get past the outer court. And if you know Deuteronomy 23:1, you'll know that eunuchs aren't going to get very far in their attempt to get into the temple grounds, because it says, 'No one who has been emasculated (castrated) by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the Lord.' You're out. You're not only a Gentile, you're a eunuch."

Think back a moment. Where was the gospel most being proclaimed in the first five chapters of Acts? In the temple courts. That's where all the conversions were happening. That's where Peter had been preaching. That's where the apostles were preaching. That's where they were holding court. That's where the whole church was meeting. Doesn't it strike you as somewhat interesting that this man—who at least could have made it into that Court of the Gentiles, that vast area on the Temple Mount—that this man had been in Jerusalem, in the temple grounds, where the Christians were regularly meeting, and no one had told him about Jesus? He is returning back to Ethiopia as bankrupt in his knowledge of Jesus as when he entered Jerusalem. I'd submit to you that the reason for that is that Christians in Jerusalem were having a great time in their faith, but their faith was encapsulated within their Judaism. Judaism, even to this day, has never been a missionary faith. You don't find any discussion in Israel today among observant, religious Jews,

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saying “Let’s go out there and evangelize those Arabs on the West Bank and Gaza strip.” There is absolutely no religious interest in Judaism, in converting anyone. It’s foreign to Judaism.

“Live and let live.” God called us. It doesn’t mean you’re an awful person, but He called us!

There’s no sense of missionary proselytism in Judaism.

That had carried over to the believers who were coming into the church. They took a look at this black man and probably, as a lot of believers who look at people who are wealthy, said, “He doesn’t need the gospel. He wouldn’t be interested.” How many times have we discriminated in the church against the up and the outers? We only have a heart for the down and outers. So here was a man who was up and out, black and Gentile, who had never been witnessed to, for however long he’d been in Jerusalem. He came back, devoid of faith. The Lord knows his hunger and this is, by the way, an encouraging thing. If you’re sometimes worried about the lost and what’s going to happen to those who have never heard a clear witness of Jesus Christ, remember this man. He had a heart that was determined to find God. He had gone to Jerusalem to worship God. And God was determined to find him.

So Philip is sent to do one-on-one with him. He comes along, runs up to the chariot, and hears the man reading. Notice again the accuracy of the account. In those days, when a person read, they read aloud. He was reading Isaiah the prophet. ““Do you understand what you’re reading?” Philip asked. ‘How can I?’” Isn’t that often the case with the Scripture? ““How can I...unless someone explains it to me?’ So he invited Philip up to come and sit with him” (Acts 8:30-31, NIV). Wouldn’t you know? He was in Isaiah 53. What a great place to be reading. Talk about timing! ““He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.’ The eunuch asked Philip, ‘Tell me, please,

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who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” (Acts 8:32–34, NIV). Philip was glad to explain to him that the passage talked about Jesus.

“Who can speak of his descendants? His life was taken from the earth.” So, on the basis of the witness of Philip, on hearing of Jesus, of Jesus’ linkage with Scripture, this man believes. “They come to some water and the eunuch said, ‘Look, here is water. Why shouldn’t I be baptized?’ and he gave orders to stop the chariot” (Acts 8:36-38, NIV). Philip didn’t say, “I can’t baptize you because I’m not an apostle, and I’ve got to check with Jerusalem first to see if it’s ok to baptize a black Gentile.” He just had enough gumption and faith at that moment to not worry about regulations from headquarters and went ahead and did it. He baptized him. Notice that the form of baptism appears to be immersion, because they went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away. That could be interpreted one of two ways. Either Philip’s literally being transported supernaturally away from there, or the Lord is simply putting an amnesia on Philip for a while, and when he came to, he was 20 miles north of Gaza and the rest of the time he evangelizes and spreads the gospel on the seacoast until he comes up to Caesarea by the Sea. The gospel now is getting out of the hills of Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, down into the coastlands. Philip will remain at Caesarea for a number of years, we will see by looking later in Acts.

Let me take a moment to put this together and tie it into where we are now. I submit to you something that may surprise you. That is: I don’t feel that acts of the church and people in the church are by nature missionary-oriented. I think being missionary-oriented is something that is a learned Christian trait, a learned Christian behavior, by and large. Of course, when we become a Christian, we want to share our faith. But we share our faith basically with our family and our friends. But it’s the Holy Spirit’s task in the world to take His people to church and begin to

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make them missionary-conscious. The lack of missionary consciousness in the Early Church is seen by the fact that, although the church grew fanatically in Jerusalem, they hadn't touched anywhere outside of Jerusalem. It had simply ignored the Great Commission, as most of the evangelical church does today.

In this church—which is one of the finest missionary churches in Southern California—as much as we do for missions, the typical adult in this church gives an average of less than three dollars a week to missions. We get very concerned about “us.” As a pastor, working with a budget that includes missions, from time to time, I almost feel, “We’ve got so much to do here. Why should we be trying to do anything anywhere else?” That was what was happening within the Jerusalem church. It’s wonderful that God is doing great things here, but there’s no church in Samaria, no church in Caesarea, no church in Damascus, no church in Antioch, no church in Ephesus, no church anywhere in the world. The Holy Spirit is concerned about bringing His church into being. He’s not going to do it through a group of people who just sit around and look at one another and say, “Aren’t we blessed? Don’t we have wonderful biblical teaching?” There is no church in the world that ever had greater preaching than the Jerusalem church. They had the Lord Himself, and when He was gone into heaven, they had the twelve apostles. Then they later had Saul, the great proclaimer of the Christian message. They had the best when it came to teaching. They had it all when it came to miracles. Never has there been a church that was so star-spangled with miracles than the Jerusalem church. It was fantastic. No wonder they didn’t want to go anywhere. It was too much fun right here. What did the Lord do? He dipped His hand into the cozy nest. The only thing that got them out was persecution. He forced the church out of the cozy nest.

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I hope we can have, in our generation, a greater heart for God than God having to hit us over the head to get our attention. Who is going to care about the church in Mexico? Who is going to care about the church reaching the ethnic diversity of Southern California? Who is going to be called to reach the university student in Southern California? We have more national leaders studying from foreign countries in Southern California than anywhere in the world. And we, as yet, do not have a coordinated strategic outreach to those university students. Who is going to hear the call of God to reach national leaders who are going to be leaders of countries that are presently studying here in the tremendous universities in Southern California? Who is going to hear the call of God to go win them in the name of the Lord. I can't think of any more effective missionary field than reaching leaders of economy, business, politics, arts and entertainment, than to do that here. Who's going to care about the church? Who's going to care about the church in Saudi Arabia or Turkey, perhaps the most difficult areas of the world to reach? Who's going to care about the church in China or the church in Thailand or the church in Brazil or Argentina or the isolated islands of the South Pacific? Who is going to care?

What this chapter is saying to us is that if the church is going to be a biblical church, and we're going to be a biblical people, we've got to be world-oriented Christians. We've got to care and we've got to be more concerned about what's happening here through our prayers, and our giving and our involvement. We have an obligation to fulfill the Great Commission. And the reason why the Lord gives us so many blessings is so we can be a blessing. The Lord is going to build His church with our willing cooperation or with us being unwillingly dragged into the arena. Once you're His, you no longer have the lock on your own life. He's going to do His thing with you.

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If you're a young person considering what you're going to do in life, I think this world needs more missionaries than it needs scholars. Not to diminish that role. There will always be a need for scholars in the church, because the faith must maintain its credibility. But there will always be a greater need for evangelists, for pastors, for teachers. I would encourage each one of you, as you look for God's will in your life, to ask, how does God want me to be a part of His world church and His world mission? Somehow, I have to be a world Christian. I've either got to be a world Christian by selecting a country somewhere to pray for or a missionary somewhere to pray for—and not just praying, “God bless the missionaries,” but maybe to adopt a missionary. I think we need to get oriented in our missions' outreach as an individual person and say, “We care about the church of Christ being established somewhere else. And if the circumstances allow it, and if God calls us to go and be a part of what God is doing today in the world, we'll do it.”

When we do that, we see Luke's little tag-line—all of a sudden, the church, which had been only in Jerusalem, becomes the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria. Or the church throughout Mexico, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Brazil, Argentina, Germany, the Scandinavian countries, Russia, China, wherever. And we can be a part of that. It's great to be alive in this generation. There's never been as much missionary expansion of the church in the whole history of the church than in the last twenty-five years. This is not an age of defeat and gloom. This is an age of unparalleled growth and opportunity for the body of Christ. Our generation has got a chance to be involved in it through prayer and giving and going.

Closing Prayer

Our Lord, it's easy in life to get caught up with our own concerns, our own needs, our own objectives, jobs, families, recreation, hobbies and spare time. The church, friends and all these are wonderful in the right place, and can be tremendously fulfilling. But when we became a

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Christian, we entered into Your heart and we purposed to come out of our own narrow limitations and to worship You as the God of the whole earth who has sent Your Son for all people and has chosen, somehow, to let that good news be born through us, not through angels and not through books dropping on people or televisions suddenly materializing, which have gospel speakers on them. But You've let that good news come to us, through to our neighbor down the block, to our city, community, state and the world. You want us to be a people who is concerned for the world and has a heart for it. You want us to be filled with the Spirit, not simply so we can be blessed and wear a spiritual scalp around ourselves, somehow testifying to our own spiritual attainments. You want us to be filled with the Spirit, to give us power to serve You in this world. We want to open ourselves anew to that. Lord, fill us with Your Spirit. Give us an unlimited view of what You want to do in this world. Give us a prayer-concern and a heart-concern for Your Body. Different places, different people. Put pastors and missionaries and national leaders and workers on our heart, so that we can continually pray and work with the Scripture in mind: "The night cometh when no man can work" (John 9:4). You are the answer to the problems in this world. You are the solution. Let us give our hearts to that. To be used for Your honor and glory. We pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.