

The Acts of the Holy Spirit

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

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Saul the Persecutor; Philip the Evangelist

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The Burial of Stephen ([8:1-2](#))

Saul was consenting to his death: While “consenting” accurately describes Saul’s attitude, the common definition of the Greek word used here (συνευδοκέω, “syneudokeō”) is perhaps a bit stronger than we would typically understand it, “to approve; to be pleased with.” Saul was not a reluctant persecutor of the Church; he took pleasure in going after Christians.

In Philippians 3:6, Paul tells us that he was so zealous in his religious faith that he persecuted the church. Saul’s supervision of the execution of Stephen here was just one example of this persecution. In chapter 26 we’ll read more about this, where among other things, Saul/Paul (his Roman name) is quoted as saying “...I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme....” One wonders how much Paul, post-conversion, must have thought about those whom he compelled to blaspheme.

In his own New Testament writings, we learn that Paul came to deeply regret this persecution of the church, writing that “I... am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” (1 Corinthians 15:9)

A great persecution arose against the church: Saul oversaw Stephen’s death, but he wasn’t alone in this; the floodgates of persecution against the Christians opened now. We’ve previously read the accounts of individual Christians being

singled out, arrested and charged, and punished. Now the group, the movement, the faith itself comes under attack in far more widespread ways.

They were scattered throughout the regions: And here we see that “seed” start be sown -- more broadly than any time in history up to that point.

It might seem that Stephen’s young ministry was cut abruptly short, ending in a tragic failure. But as been so eloquently written many times before, the blood of the martyrs (like Stephen) became the seed of the church.

There are different words in Koine Greek language for the idea of “scatter.” One has the sense of scattering to make something disappear, like scattering a crowd, or someone’s ashes. The word used here (διασπείρω, “diaspeirō”) carries the idea of scattering in the sense of planting or sowing seeds.

We should not be surprised by this, of course. In Acts 1:8 Jesus told His followers they would indeed carry His gospel beyond Jerusalem, to Judea, Samaria, and ultimately the whole world. This is how that starts happening beyond Jerusalem, catapulted not by heroic or strategic efforts, but by the propulsion of persecution!

It may be difficult to accept that persecution of the church was in line with the Holy Spirit’s plan; how could mistreatment of the saints be in accordance with the will of God? Yet from here on we see it in black and white: God can and will use pressing circumstances and even persecution and mistreatment to grow His church, to guide us into His will.

Devout men: Some Jews were horrified at Stephen’s execution/murder. Perhaps this is the Spirit’s way of reminding us through Luke’s writing that not all Jewish people of that time were enemies of Christianity.

Jewish law prohibited open mourning for someone that had been executed, Luke’s record here suggests that these “devout men” publicly repented of Stephen’s murder.

Accidental Missionaries ([8:3-4](#))

He made *havoc*: Your translation may vary, but the Greek word used here (λυμαίνω, “lymainō”) could refer to an army destroying a city, or a wild animal tearing at its meat. Saul viciously attacked Christians, including women. The

grammatical tense of the verb (imperfect) indicates ongoing action; this is not a single incident, but a continuing practice.

Those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word: It's not that all those who left Jerusalem under this persecution were preachers in any formal sense. But boy, did they have stories to tell! So most were accidental missionaries who talked about Jesus and the events they had witnessed and lived wherever they wound up.

In what ways have you found yourself to be an “accidental missionary”?

Philip Preaches to the Samaritans (8:5-8)

Philip, like Stephen, was one of the men chosen to serve the church in practical ways when the dispute regarding Hellenist widows arose (chapter 6). He was also one of those forced to flee persecution, ending up in Samaria.

About 600 years before this, the Assyrians conquered this part of northern Israel, and effectively deported all the wealthy and middle-class Jews. Then they moved in a mostly pagan population, which intermarried with the Jews that remained. From this mingling of lower-class Jews and brutal non-Jews came the Samaritans, who as we know from the Gospels were detested by “higher-class” Jews, who considered Samaritans to be compromising half-breeds who corrupted the worship of the true God. This is one reason the parable of the Good Samaritan is so profoundly powerful! Even James and John (and likely the other disciples as well) thought that the Samaritans were only good for being burned by God's judgment (Luke 9:51-56).

Yet here we have Philip preaching Christ to them. No matter what his history, Philip was no longer racist towards the Samaritans. Jesus had worked in his heart such that there was no room left for whatever prejudice he may have previously held.

Hearing and seeing the miracles which he did: Remind you of anyone we've read about very recently? Philip proclaimed the gospel, with signs and wonders providing some impressive confirmation and credibility. The Holy Spirit does not have in mind for Philip the same plan He had for Stephen. As Samaritan people came to believe in Jesus, there was “great joy”.

Jesus Himself had “sown the seed” in Samaria during His ministry (John 4:1-26). Philip was now witness to the harvest.

Simon the Sorcerer (8:9-13)

A certain man called Simon: This Simon apparently enjoyed a fair degree of local fame. He must've been a smart fellow, too, as the wording here indicates that Simon was a magi. True magi were a highly-educated class of astronomers and scientists, but it was not uncommon for local wizards and sorcerers to claim that title for themselves. They then used it to prey on the ignorance and superstitions of the common people. We're told here that he "astonished" the people, so Simon was quite good at this! Of course, whatever knowledge and/or power Simon had, it was not from God.

But now those who had previously been astonished by Simon and his sorceries now believed Philip and the Gospel he preached, and were baptized. Even The Astonishing Simon The Magi (okay, I just make that up, but it would look good on a business card, eh?) declared new faith in the one true God, was baptized, and continued with Philip. Simon the leader became a follower of Jesus through Philip and his ministry. At this point (8:13), there is nothing to indicate that Simon's belief was false or insincere. More on our friend Simon later....

The Holy Spirit indwells the Samaritans (8:14-17)

They sent Peter and John to them: When Jesus gave the keys of the kingdom of heaven Peter and the other apostles in Matthew 16:19, it was for this purpose. Here they officially welcomed the Samaritans, who had previously been excluded by the people of God, into the kingdom of God, to become those people!

They laid hands on them: The empowering and filling of the Holy Spirit is often received as hands are laid on a person, and prayer is offered for them (Acts 9:17, 1 Timothy 4:14, 2 Timothy 1:6). That's not to say, however, that a formal ceremony is required, but clearly it pleases God to work in this way. In the sacraments His pleasure is to involve the physical elements and fellow Christians in the deploying of these "means of grace." This is entirely for our benefit and in accordance with the will of God. It's a part of what Luther encouraged us to be as "little Christs". So we should always be ready and joyful to receive whatever special graces and/or gifts God has to give us through the laying on of hands.

They received the Holy Spirit: We don't know exactly how this was evident; perhaps obvious spiritual gifts were manifested (1 Corinthians 12:7-10). The fact that these Christians received the Holy Spirit in an overt way subsequent

experience to their salvation has caused much controversy, but it need not be controversial. We should not turn this miraculous gifting by God into a law. The Holy Spirit confers gifts and abilities in accordance with His good pleasure, in His perfect timing, and always as a function of His kind intentions (grace and mercy) towards His people.

Whatever the Samaritans experienced here, it seems to have been more than the “baseline” bestowal of the Holy Spirit that always attends belief in Jesus via God’s grace manifested through His gift of faith. Does that make their experience better than anyone else’s? No! Rather, it makes it perfect for that time and that place amongst that people.

To expect -- let alone demand via doctrinal statement -- that God must therefore always work in this same way with all believers is not only an over-amplification of these verses; taken to the extreme it is a violation of the First Commandment, and anti-Christ.

At the same time, let us not fear this miracle! Such special “filling” of the Holy Spirit is something we can piously desire, and even ask God for. But we should never think it a requirement, as if the miracle of saving faith (salvation itself!) were not enough.

Simon Blows it, Peter Knows it, Simon Throws it ([8:18-25](#))

Simon noticed that when Peter and John laid hands on the Samaritans and prayed for them, something happened. He was really impressed by that something!

He offered them money: Simon, Simon, Simon. You were off to such a good start! But now Simon is tempted back to his old ways, mistakenly thinking that the Holy Spirit and His gifts could be bought or sold. Now, **this** is a First Commandment problem, because Simon wanted to direct the working of the Spirit; he wanted to be the master of God, rather than to believe in God as his Master.

This is where we get the work “simony” when speaking of the sin of buying or selling church offices or privileges. We don’t hear a lot about it, but can be certain that this sin is practiced still today. It is, I think, an inversion we sometimes see in the so-called “prosperity gospel”, a confusion or conflation of blessing and wealth. One that becomes a conflagration. See what I did there?

Your money perish with you: Peter’s rebuke here is harsh and strong, and it needs to be. J. B. Phillips takes a bit of license with this verse, but I really like the way he

emphasizes Peter's (and God's!) tenor and message, translating it as: "To hell with you and your money."

Peter's discernment and bold statement must have been difficult or awkward to witness. I dare say that few today would rebuke a "young" Christian so strongly, and in fact we are encouraged to correct each other with gentleness. Again, we see the Holy Spirit at work, making Peter willing to tell Simon the truth in love, though it was unquestionably hard for Simon and those near him to hear it.

"...For your heart is not right in the sight of God" cuts to the chase, prompting Simon to repentance -- right then, right there.

Philip clearly regarded Simon as a Christian – a follower of Jesus – because he baptized him (8:13). Of course, just like us, Philip could not actually see into Simon's spiritual heart and know with complete certainty that he was sincere in his faith; but he had demonstrated enough to make his proclamation of faith credible.

When Peter says, "You have no part or share in this ministry," he employs the same words Jesus used for him when Peter had objected to Jesus' washing his feet in the upper room (John 13:8)! Strong words from Jesus? Yes. Peter was not an unbeliever; he was however speaking and acting in a manner outside of the will of God. Now in Acts Peter treats Simon with the same, heart-rending truth.

Pray to the Lord for me, that none of these things come upon me: Instead of actually humbling his heart before God, Simon asks Peter to pray he would be spared the consequences of his sin. Simon felt a true conviction of the Holy Spirit, but was not yet able to humble his own heart before God. But Peter couldn't humble Simon's heart for him.

We don't know what became of Simon. I hope he followed through on the conviction evident in verse 24. Some say he went off the deep end, and became a dangerous false teacher among the early Christians. What we do know is that Peter and John had a successful, fruitful ministry in Samaria.

Philip: To the Ethiopian and Beyond! [\(8:26-38\)](#)

Arise, and go toward the south: One might well wonder if it was difficult for Philip to leave the great success of his work in Samaria, to go out to the desolate desert, but God had a plan in it all. Philip chose God's plan, always a wise decision!

A man of Ethiopia...had come to Jerusalem to worship: On the road, Philip encountered an Ethiopian proselyte to Judaism returning from Jerusalem – reading the Bible!

In that day Ethiopia was larger and richer than modern-day Ethiopia. We don't know the specific mechanics God used here, but it's pretty easy to imagine ways that, whether by Jewish travelers, or other evidences of the faith, someone like this noble servant of the queen would be prompted to travel to Jerusalem, and end up with the Word of God (or a portion of it) in his hands.

He was reading Isaiah the prophet: It seems this Ethiopian was hungry for God's Word. Typically, a scroll like this would cost a lot of money, so it showed that he really wanted to read and know God's word.

It took real boldness for Philip to go right up to the Ethiopian's chariot and speak to him, but again, that is what the Holy Spirit told him to do, so he did it. The Ethiopian was a rich and powerful man, but Philip knew that this man needed Jesus as much as anyone else. Perhaps there's a lesson for us here, that we should not fear speaking about Jesus to those who are important or privileged.

Do you understand what you are reading? It was good for the Ethiopian to read the Bible, but here – yet again – we see that it pleases God to use His people to communicate His gospel. Could the Ethiopian have learned much from reading Isaiah? Yes, of course. But the end of that education is of no value if it doesn't include knowing about the One of whom Isaiah prophesied.

How can I, unless someone guides me? This man knew the benefit of being educated by someone whose knowledge exceeds his own, and we was feeling the need for that kind of person. We also learn here that no Christian is an island. We all learn from those who have gone before us, and those that God has placed in our lives. In so many ways God has designed us to be dependent on one another! And there is no higher privilege than to help a fellow Christian grow in learning and appreciate of God's Word. It blesses both giver and receiver!

Philip talked about more than the specific passage from Isaiah that the Ethiopian asked about. He started there, establishing common ground with the man, but made his way to talking about Jesus.

...Here is water. What hinders me from being baptized? Wow! Perhaps Philip ended his explanation of the gospel with encouragement of baptism like Peter did at Pentecost – we don't really know. But we do know that "faith comes by hearing", and the Ethiopian heard, believed, and wanted to be baptized right then and there. He saw the truth of God and knew that it was for him. Not later, not after sufficient training or instruction. Right now!

This was a work of the Holy Spirit, not a tribute to Philip's salesmanship.

If you believe with all your heart, you may: It seems that even Philip was caught a bit off guard by the Ethiopian's faith-filled response. This reads not like a requirement, but more like a gut-check, "Really? Are you sure?! You truly believe in Jesus – NOW???" So this statement from Philip may be viewed as an insistence that the Ethiopian proceed with baptism only if he really "got it", or perhaps a better reading is Philip acknowledging what he witnessed before him; a man who had just then, just right here, been shepherded out of the darkness into the miraculous new light of faith in Christ. Either way, the message is simple: believe with all your heart, just as Jesus Himself entreats you to!

I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God: Nailed it. This is a pure and true confession of faith. He has just stated the essential belief that is the **mark** of anyone who has come to faith in Christ. When the Ethiopian said "Jesus Christ," he confessed that Jesus is the Messiah. He agreed with his mind and heart that Jesus is the sin-bearing servant that Isaiah described and Jesus fulfilled. Forgive me if I say it again: Wow!

The Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away: Wow, again! Suddenly the Holy Spirit carries Philip away just as he and the Ethiopian came out of the water, transporting him supernaturally to the former Philistine city of Azotus (a.k.a. Ashdod).

And what did Philip do after this? Proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus Christ. No wonder Philip is the one apostle in the New Testament specifically given the title, "The Evangelist". Acts 21:8 finds him still in Caesarea, doing the work of evangelism there.