

The Gospel Goes to Many Samaritans and to One African

A Study in Acts Chapter 8

So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?"



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Acts Chapter 8

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Acts 8:1

Saul consented to the stoning of Stephen, heartily approved of it and agreed that putting him to death was the right thing to do (Acts 22:20). He considered Stephen to be a blasphemer who should be stoned to death (Lev. 24:10-16). Saul had no problem putting Christians to death (Acts 26:10). Saul would later learn that he himself was a blasphemer (1 Tim. 1:13) who found great mercy from a pardoning God (1 Tim. 1:14-15)! Saul himself, like Stephen, would later experience the agony of being stoned. However, the difference was that he survived this near-death ordeal whereas Stephen did not (Acts 14:19-20; 2 Cor. 11:25).

After Stephen's death the hostility against Christians intensified, and there was great persecution against the Church.¹ God can turn terrible tragedy into great blessing. The tragedy of Stephen's martyrdom resulted in the scattering of believers, and everywhere they went, they spread the Word of the Lord throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria in fulfillment of Acts 1:8. Due to this scattering, the gospel also went as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch according to Acts 11:19. The persecution, designed to eliminate Christians, actually furthered the cause of the gospel. "A grain of wheat had been planted in the ground [Stephen's death], and much fruit would inevitably result. The winds of affliction were scattering the seeds of the gospel to distant places."² Stephen, a relatively young man, ended his service to the Lord prematurely, at least from a human perspective. The persecution against Stephen led to a much wider persecution against all Jerusalem believers. The Apostles stayed in Jerusalem to encourage the Hebrew-speaking believers. The persecution may have been primarily against Hellenistic Jews like Stephen, and most of these were scattered.

The text says that "they were **all** scattered" (verse 1), with the exception being the Apostles. Keep in mind that there were thousands of believers in Jerusalem at this time (Acts 2:41; 4:4; 5:14). Did they all leave Jerusalem due to this great persecution? We do know that the Jerusalem Church continued to exist and did not become extinct (Acts 9:26; 11:2,22; 15:4; 21:17).³ The **scattering** of a great number of believers led to the **spreading** of God's Word.⁴ Satan was going everywhere

¹The writer to the Hebrews may have had this Jewish persecution in mind when he wrote Hebrews 10:32-34.

²William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary*, p. 1605.

³The explanation is either that all the believers left Jerusalem (the Apostles excepted) and later many returned, or that the "all" refers to a massive scattering without inferring that every single believer left the city.

⁴The word "scattered" is a verb commonly used for spreading seeds (compare John 12:24).

persecuting Christians while Christians were going everywhere spreading the gospel! This was the first major missionary endeavor of the early Church.

Comfort and happiness is not necessarily God's priority for each and every one of us. His priority is to "make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19-20). He wants the Church to spread out and to scatter to the ends of the earth with the life-changing message of the gospel. We thank the Lord for that urgency that He has laid upon us to take this message and make it known around the world.

I (John Whitcomb) was raised in China during the late 1920's. My father and mother were unbelievers. My father was serving in the military in order to protect missionaries and business people from the terrorists that were tearing that great country to pieces. I was an only child. I played with Chinese children and had a Chinese nurse who watched over me on many occasions when my parents were traveling. I came back from China in 1930 speaking fluent Mandarin at the age of six! It was a great shock and embarrassment for me to come back to America and have American children laugh at me because of my Chinese accent and my stumbling English! I never forgot that embarrassment and decided to suppress that language forever, and it sank into the subconscious part of my brain. How sad that I have forgotten this, because more people speak Mandarin in our world than any other language! Over a billion people in the world speak Mandarin Chinese. Four hundred million speak Spanish and three hundred sixty million speak English, the second and third most used languages. So obviously when we get to heaven we will all speak Mandarin Chinese!

God laid that nation on my heart. When I finished my studies at Grace Seminary in 1951 I had a desire to go back to China as a missionary, but the Lord had other plans because the door slammed shut and all the missionaries were thrown out of China. But one of my students in the doctoral program at Grace Seminary, Dr. Paul Lee Tan, spoke fluent Mandarin. He was raised in Manila in the Philippines. He has lectured for decades in that part of the world and other places. He is an expert on Bible prophecy, having written a book entitled, *The Interpretation of Prophecy*. He also authored a wonderful tract, *Abundant Life Guide*. It has a colorful and attractive salvation message both in Chinese and in English. These can be used in Chinese restaurants and elsewhere. You say, "I can't go to China." God must have known that so He brought hundreds of thousands of Chinese people here to America, many of whom are studying in our universities. May we reach them with God's truth!

In God's providence my father was fluent in Spanish because he was raised in Cuba and became a professor of Spanish at West Point. He taught me some Spanish, so everywhere I go I look for Spanish-speaking people. I have a tract in Spanish, *Four Things God Wants You To Know*. So with one pocket full of Chinese tracts, fill your other pocket with Spanish tracts. We can't all go to Mexico and Honduras and Guatemala and Venezuela, etc., but God has brought many Spanish-speaking people to our country. Perhaps our churches are not obedient enough to send believers to these countries, so God brings many of them here. May we learn something from Acts chapter eight. God is infinitely concerned that His precious message about His beloved Son be carried to the ends of the earth, by one means or another, sooner or later, in His providential time and way. I pray, "Lord, help us not to be forced out of America by persecution." It's as if the Lord were saying, "You either go or I'll make you go!" But one way or another God encourages us to obey and fulfill His commission.

Acts 8:2

Devout Jewish men carried Stephen to his burial and made great lamentation over him. We are reminded how Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea gave the Lord Jesus a proper burial.⁵ How tragic and how sad were these circumstances surrounding Stephen's death! Why would God have allowed this to happen? Such thoughts must have flooded their minds. But we know that all things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28). God is expert at taking tragic circumstances and working them together for good. Just ask Joseph (Gen. 50:20)!

Acts 8:3-4

Saul was an active participant in the death of Stephen, watching over the garments of his killers (Acts 7:58) and approving of their murderous deed. Saul was God's instrument to get the early Church out of the Holy Land and into different mission fields. The verb "made havoc" (KJV) means that Saul outrageously maltreated the believers, having received his authority from the chief priests (Acts 26:10). He ravaged the Church. The verb "ravaged" [*elumaineto*] means "destroy" and was used of the mangling by a wild beast as it would tear apart its victims. The Church at Jerusalem was torn apart by this fierce persecution. Paul's own description of these persecutions is found in Acts 22:4,19-20; 26:10-11; 1 Tim. 1:13.⁶ He literally dragged men and women out of their houses and into prison.⁷ And prison, for many, was but the first step to death (Acts 26:10). Saul abandoned the milder approach of his teacher Gamaliel (Acts 5:38-39). The text seems to indicate that Saul was the key figure in this wave of persecution, in that he is mentioned both in verse 1 and in verse 3. At our prayer meetings I have never heard this kind of prayer, "Lord, please persecute us and please smash our church buildings so that we will scatter everywhere preaching the gospel." This is the type of thing which happened in Acts chapter eight. By one means or another God will get His message out to the ends of the earth! We tend not to want our "comfortable Christianity" to be disrupted. How boldly and how fearlessly these early Christians went forth with God's life-transforming message!

It should be noted that prior to Acts chapter 8 Jerusalem was the center and focal point of God's working, but beginning in Acts 8 Jerusalem began to fade into the background. In Old Testament times Jerusalem was the centerpiece of God's program which revolved around Israel. In the new dispensation, Jerusalem is not the center point, but merely the starting point ("**beginning** at Jerusalem"—Luke 24:47; compare Acts 1:8).

⁵Ananias is also described as being "devout" (Acts 22:12).

⁶Paul declared that he persecuted "the church of God" (1 Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13). This fact shows the error of the ultradispensational view that the Church did not come into existence until Paul had received the revelation concerning the Church. The Church existed even before Paul was saved. Compare also Romans 16:7, wherein Paul speaks of those who "were in Christ before me."

⁷The KJV indicates that Saul entered into "every house." While the persecution was intense, it is doubtful that Saul entered into every single house belonging to the thousands of believers living in Jerusalem. The word "every" is not in the Greek text. Darby's translation is "entering into the houses one after the other." Saul went "from house to house" (as rendered by many versions).

Acts 8:5

Philip was one of the original deacons (Acts 6:5).⁸ He was not an Apostle, and not to be confused with Philip the Apostle. The name “Philip” means “lover of horses,” but as we read this chapter we are going to see that Philip was a lover of souls, a gifted evangelist (Acts 21:8; Eph. 4:11). The early Jerusalem deacons were all Greek-speaking Jews (Hellenists). These were the Jews who were heavily persecuted by the Greek-speaking unbelieving Jews. Philip “went down.” Since Jerusalem was an elevated city in the mountains, when you left Jerusalem you would go down to a lower elevation. This is the first time the gospel was preached to the Samaritans after Pentecost. Exactly which city in the region of Samaria this refers to is unclear. It could have been the city of Sabaste, where the ancient city of Samaria had been located, or it could have been the city of Sychar where the Lord Jesus met the woman at the well (John 4) and where many Samaritans believed on Christ (John 4:39-41). Or, it could have been the city of Gitta which, according to Justin Martyr, was the birthplace of Simon the sorcerer. Another possibility is the city of Neapolis (ancient Shechem, modern Nablus) which was the headquarters of the Samaritan religion.⁹ The Lord Jesus said that “the fields were white already unto harvest” (John 4:35), and Philip was God’s special instrument in this Samaritan harvest. In Acts 8:1 we see God’s plan to bring the gospel to Samaria, all in perfect harmony with Acts 1:8, God’s outline of the book of Acts.

Why was there such enmity between the Jews and the Samaritans? Hundreds of years earlier, in 722 B.C., the northern tribes were conquered by the Assyrians and deported. At the same time, Gentiles were imported from various parts of the empire (2 Kings 17:24), and there were mixed marriages between Gentiles and those Jews who were still left from the northern ten tribes. This became an amalgam, a mixed race of people (part Jew and part Gentile). They were half-breeds both religiously and genetically. They became a tremendous thorn in the side of the Jews after the Babylonian captivity. Governor Zerubbabel and Jeshua returned back to the Holy Land from Babylon with 50,000 loyal Jews in order to reestablish the temple worship in Jerusalem. They set up an altar and planned to rebuild the second temple. The Samaritans came down and said, “Let us help you. We worship God just like you do. We’ve been worshiping God ever since the Assyrian king brought us here.” The orthodox Jews under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Jeshua said, in effect, “Thank you, but no thanks! You do not worship God the way we do. Please go away now (cf. Ezra 4:3).” It was a very non-ecumenical response, and it created tremendous animosity and hatred. The Samaritans and others hated the Jews and were terrified at the prospect of a Jewish nation being established right in their midst. So they harassed them and attacked them and maligned them before the king of Meda Persia, and the whole program collapsed for twenty years. Finally Zerubbabel and Jeshua were encouraged and challenged by two prophets, namely Haggai and Zechariah. They were exhorted to get busy and build the temple, and in four short years it was done (in 516 B.C.).

From that time on, the Samaritans were hated by the Jews. The Jews had no dealings with the

⁸Philip’s office was deacon; his gift was evangelism (Acts 21:8; compare Eph. 4:11), a gift which was clearly in evidence in Acts chapter 8. God gave gifted evangelists to the Church (Eph. 4:11), but Philip was the only individual in Scripture called an evangelist, though there were surely many others.

⁹Merrill F. Unger, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* [Union Gospel Press, 1967], p. 124.

Samaritans (John 4:9), and no intermarriage was allowed. They would not even eat together. Finally there appeared the Son of God, and in John chapter 4 He met a woman of Samaria at a well. He told her, “You do not know Whom you worship. Salvation is of the Jews. You are in total ignorance of how to approach the one, true and living God, but the hour is coming and now is when they that worship Him will worship Him in spirit and in truth.” He led this dear woman to the Lord and she brought many other Samaritans to Jesus. And they said, “Now we believe, not because of thy saying: for we have heard Him ourselves and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world” (John 4:42). Thus the seed was planted in the region of the Samaritans and Philip would water that seed (compare 1 Cor. 3:6). Samaria was forbidden territory for a Jew, but Philip obeyed the Lord (Acts 1:8). This was a very bold act on the part of Philip.

Acts 8:6-8

God enabled Philip to perform miracles. Prior to this it was mainly the Apostles who performed miracles, but here Philip was given this supernatural ability. Demon-possessed people were delivered and those with serious sicknesses were healed.¹⁰ God was authenticating His message through Philip to the Samaritans by means of spectacular miracles. They were amazed by his miracles and they paid attention to his message. What credentials did Philip have? The mighty power of God was upon him. As a result of this demonstration of power there was great joy in that Samaritan city. When the true and living God finally breaks through into the darkness with His unique, essential light, then sadness and depression and godlessness and immorality vanish away and truth and joy and peace come flooding in.

Acts 8:9-11

The term “sorcerer” (*magos*) means a wizard, one claiming to have magical, occult or demonic powers. We get our word “magic” from this term. In Africa such a person is called a “medicine man.” Based on this Greek word, Simon the sorcerer is often referred to as Simon Magus. The practice of magic or sorcery was common in the ancient pagan world. The term “bewitched” (KJV) simply means that he astonished or amazed the people. “Simon practiced magic. He was conversant with and adept in demon-controlled religionism. He was evidently a kind of psychic. In communion with evil spirits, he possessed superhuman knowledge and performed occult phenomena which amazed the credulous Samaritans.”¹¹

Notice the conjunction “but” at the beginning of the sentence. When this follows something good (“great joy,” verse 8), then it indicates something bad. The account of Simon is ominous. Is it necessarily bad to present oneself as “some great one”? We are certainly warned not to be like Diotrefes who sought the preeminence for himself. The Lord Jesus claimed that He was preeminent and that He was Someone great. How great did He say He was? He said, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). You can’t be greater than that! He also referred to Himself as “the

¹⁰Notice that a clear distinction is made in verse 7 between those who had demons cast out of them and those who were healed of serious physical problems. This fact runs counter to the theory that people in Bible times were superstitious, believing that physical ailments were all caused by demons. Even in Bible times a clear distinction was made.

¹¹Merrill F. Unger, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* [Union Gospel Press, 1967], p. 125.

great King” (Matt. 5:35). How could the Lord Jesus say such wonderful things about Himself and be righteous, when Simon was clearly wrong to make such boasts? It is simply because the Lord Jesus was great and Simon was not! Simon lied about himself; Jesus told the truth about Himself. If Jesus had said that He was not great and that He was not the Son of God and that He was not one with the Father, then He would have lied. Theudas was another man who thought he was very special (Acts 5:36), and the Roman army crushed and eliminated him. How careful we need to be about what we say about ourselves: “For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself” (Gal. 6:3).

There will be another man, soon to appear on this earth, who will also claim to have the great power of God. The Antichrist will be the final, ultimate liar under Satan. His power will be derived from the evil one, not from God. In Acts 8 the gospel was spreading to the Samaritans, and we should expect Satanic opposition. In this case, Satan had one of his children, Simon, profess to be a believer and join the ranks of the disciples. One of Satan’s most effective methods is sowing tares among the wheat (Matt. 13:24-30).

Simon, according to Irenaeus [*Against Heresies*, i. 23], was the founder of Gnosticism, a serious error which the Apostles had to deal with, as did Paul in his letter to the Colossians and as did John in his Epistles. Non-canonical writings contain many other stories about Simon, none of which are positive, and many of which cannot be fully verified.¹²

Acts 8:12-13

The Samaritans responded to the preaching of Philip, and we are told that Simon believed also. “Praise the Lord! Simon is also converted!” But we must proceed cautiously here. Was he really born again or not? Did he really exercise true saving faith? Did he really believe to the saving of his soul? The text clearly states that “Simon himself believed” (verse 13).

For a case like this, John chapter 2 is very helpful. “When He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, in the feast day, many believed in His name, when they saw the miracles which He did” (John 2:23). Notice the basis of their faith. It was based on the miracles which they saw. “But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because He knew all men, and needed not that any should testify of man: for He knew what was in man” (John 2:24-25). Verse 24 literally says, “Jesus did not entrust Himself to them” (the verb “entrust” comes from the same verb “believe” in verse 23). Did they believe in His name or didn’t they? They really did not believe unto salvation. Instead they were merely impressed by the miracles that He did. This was similar to the “faith” of Nicodemus. Just two verses later Nicodemus declares his faith in our Lord’s miracles, “Rabbi, we know that Thou art a Teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that Thou doest, except God be with him” (John 3:2). Nicodemus, like Simon, believed in Him because of the miracles which He did, and yet Nicodemus was told by Jesus that he needed to be born again (John 3:3,5). Nicodemus was still in unbelief, at this point, even though he believed in Christ because of the miracles! So the word “believe” can mean different things depending upon the context in which it is used.

This is a warning to all of us. Are there not millions of Americans who at one time or another,

¹²For a discussion of these “Simon stories,” see F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts*, pages 178-179.

perhaps in an evangelistic campaign, have said, “Yes, I believe!” Lord, help us to be very careful in evaluating such statements. We do not want to endanger a person’s eternal destiny by giving him the impression that he is saved when he may not be. Keep in mind the parable of the sower. Those “stony ground” hearers joyfully received the Word and believed, and yet they had no root and their faith was only temporary and not properly rooted. They believed only “for a while” and then fell away when things got difficult (Luke 8:13). The discerning student of Scripture must be careful to recognize that the term “believe” does not always rise to the level of saving faith.

Simon never really believed unto salvation, but he saw an opportunity. We are reminded in James chapter 2 that the faith that does not result in good works is a dead faith (James 2:17,20,26). James, the pastor of the Church in Jerusalem, knew the difference. Simon was astounded at these miracles, and no doubt he knew the difference between his fake miracles and these genuine ones. He was overwhelmed with what he saw. His sorceries, perhaps even aided by demons, could not be compared with these genuine works done in the power of God.

Simon’s profession of faith opens the way for a child of Satan to enter the Church. Satan always seeks to plant the false among the true (Matt. 13:24-30, the parable of the wheat and tares). Satan, if he fails to defeat the Church, is glad to join the Church by means of false profession on the part of his child, a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

Acts 8:14-17 A Samaritan Pentecost!

What we read in these verses is abnormal, and rare in Church history. We have a group of people who believed the gospel and were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, and yet the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon them.¹³ These people, for the most part (Simon excepted), were genuinely saved and baptized, but they had not yet received the Holy Spirit. We will see a similar case in Acts 19:1-6 where there were certain disciples of John the Baptist who had not yet received the Holy Spirit. These men in Acts 19 were in need of further revelation. They were not yet incorporated into the body and bride of Christ by means of Spirit baptism (1 Cor. 12:13).

So here in Acts 8 we have the postponement of the coming of the Holy Spirit which contradicts the normal pattern. Even in Acts 5, Peter said that those who obey God and His gospel will be given the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:32). In Romans 8:9 we learn the normal pattern for our age, that every person who belongs to Christ has the Spirit, and that if a person does not have the Holy Spirit, he is none of His. And yet here in Acts 8 we have true Samaritan baptized believers who have not yet received the Holy Spirit. It must be kept in mind that the book of Acts is a transitional book, telling of the colossal complexities of God’s providential transformation of Israelite believers into Church believers. Even the Apostle Peter was utterly confused as to which program he was a part of, and God would need to help him understand these things as we shall see in Acts chapter 10.

Why did Peter and John need to go to Samaria to give official approval of these new converts so that they could be accepted into the body and bride of Christ without first becoming Jewish proselytes?

You and I did not need to become Jews in order to become members of the body of Christ. Keep in mind that Peter was given the keys of the kingdom (Matt. 16:19). Keys open doors, and Peter was

¹³Baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus does not mean that the Trinitarian formula was not used. See the discussion of this under Acts 2 (Special Topic #10).

the man who held the keys and who opened the door of the gospel to Jewish believers at Pentecost. Therefore Peter had to be present when the gospel door was opened to the Samaritans, and later when the gospel door would be opened to the Gentiles in Acts 10. When we speak of “the gospel door” we are speaking, of course, of entrance into the body and bride of Christ, by way of Spirit baptism (1 Cor. 12:13). Why did not Saul of Tarsus need to have an Apostle to approve of his conversion on the road to Damascus? It was because Saul was 100 percent Jewish, and Jewish entrance into the body of Christ was already officially approved by God at Pentecost where all twelve Apostles were present. The most difficult thing for a Jew to accept was that a person who was one hundred percent Gentile could believe the gospel and become saved without first becoming a Jew. It was hard enough to accept the salvation of Samaritans, but Gentiles? The very idea itself was totally revolutionary, and to most Jews, repulsive.

Harry Ironside further explains why the Samaritans did not receive the Spirit the moment they believed on Christ:

Why did not these Samaritans receive the Spirit of God the moment they professed faith in the Lord Jesus Christ? The reason is perfectly clear. For something like 500 years the temple at Jerusalem and the temple at Mt. Gerizim had been rival sanctuaries. The Jews in the south and the Samaritans north of Jerusalem had each claimed to be God’s chosen people, and there was intense rivalry between them. One can understand that if the Spirit had immediately fallen on these Samaritan believers, when they received the Word, then the strife between the Jews and Samaritans might have been perpetuated and there might have been, down through the centuries, two different groups of Christians, each claiming to be the true Church. But when the apostles came from Jerusalem and identified themselves with the believing Samaritans, and God gave the Holy Spirit to them in answer to the prayers of the apostles, the work was recognized definitely and openly as one—there was but one Body, whether Jews in Judea or Samaritans in Samaria. All were joined into one Body of which the risen Christ was the Head.¹⁴

F. F. Bruce adds the following:

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.¹⁵

Peter and John laid their hands on these Samaritans and they received the Holy Spirit (verse 17). This statement excludes Simon, for reasons which we will discuss shortly. When they received the Holy Spirit they became members of the body and bride of Christ, with the result that Jews and Samaritans were joined together as one! The Apostle John’s gracious actions here were in sharp contrast with his request, prior to the cross, that a city of Samaria should be destroyed by fire from heaven (Luke 9:52-56). Phillips explains the significance of the laying on of hands:

¹⁴Harry Ironside, *Acts*, pages 184-185.

¹⁵F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts*, p. 182.

In the Bible the laying on of hands is always a symbol of identification. In the Old Testament the sinner identified himself with his offering by laying his hands upon it. Then, when it was slain, it was as though he had been slain. By laying their hands on the Samaritans, Peter and John formally identified themselves, the rest of the apostles, and all the Jewish church with the new believers. Henceforth they would be one church. There would be one Lord, one faith, one baptism. What a happy ending to centuries of strife and ill will!¹⁶

Acts 8:18-19

Whether or not tongues were spoken here we are not told. There may have been a manifestation of speaking in tongues. Tongues were spoken at Pentecost (Acts 2) when Jewish believers were baptized into the body of Christ, and tongues were spoken in Acts 10 when Gentile believers were baptized into the body of Christ. It may have happened here in Acts 8 as Samaritan believers were baptized into the body of Christ, although we are not told this.¹⁷ However, when the Spirit came upon them there was some kind of powerful demonstration *that Simon saw* and which greatly impressed him. Simon wanted this same power to be able to give people the gift of the Holy Spirit. To him it was a great moneymaking scheme. Simon had a covetous heart like Balaam! However, no one can ever manipulate the Holy Spirit for selfish purposes.

Acts 8:20-21

Now we have two Simons face to face—Simon Peter and Simon Magus. Peter was given special discernment from God to know Simon's heart. We saw a similar example in Acts 5:3-4 where Peter had knowledge of what Ananias had done in secret and was able to fully expose Ananias' sin. Peter did the same with Simon and correctly discerned his true spiritual state: "Thy heart is not right in the sight of God" (Acts 8:21). Because of this account we have added a word to our English dictionary: simony. Simony is the buying or the selling of a church office, that is, seeking to buy things from God that only God can give. A person who practices simony is called a "simoniac." This became a colossal problem in the Middle Ages as people would sell ecclesiastical offices and benefits. One could buy the office of a bishop, or a cardinal's hat. Simony was so widespread in the Dark Ages that the Reformation was provoked by people who were disgusted at the way indulgences were being sold. For example, if one were to pay money to build Saint Peter's Cathedral in Rome, then he

¹⁶John Phillips, *Exploring Acts*, p. 154.

¹⁷In *God's Gift of Tongues* by George Zeller, the following statement is made on pages 37-38: "Another momentous day in the history of the Church is described in Acts 8. For the first time the door of faith was opened to the people of Samaria (a mixed race—half Jew and half Gentile). They also received the Spirit and became full-fledged members of the body of Christ (Acts 8:14-17). God's new program, as outlined in Acts 1:8, was being wondrously outworked in history. Although not specifically stated it is almost certain that the Samaritan believers also spoke in tongues when they received the gift of the Spirit. Probably it was this manifestation of tongues that so impressed Simon (Acts 8:18-19). God once again used tongues to signal an important turning point in the forward progress of the gospel. The Jews could not help but be impressed by this drastic change in God's dealing with men (compare Matthew 10:5; John 4:9; 8:48). The hated Samaritans were now fellow members of the same body! The enmity had been abolished at the cross (cf. Ephesians 2:13-22)!"

would supposedly get all kinds of spiritual benefits and suffer less time in purgatory. Simon tried to obtain spiritual power to promote and exalt himself. Anytime we seek spiritual power or abilities to advance ourselves, we make the same error. Preaching to gain recognition or status is simony. Serving with an eye to advancement in the Church's power structure is simony. Even seeking to be godly so others will think we are godly is a type of simony. We all have a fallen nature, as well as a new nature (if we are saved). We are vulnerable to have Satan manipulate our thinking and our perspectives so that we seek to gain power and authority and blessing under God in an illegitimate way. May God deliver us from anything that would detract from the glory and purity of God's true ministry in our hearts and in our Churches.

“Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money” (Acts 8:20).¹⁸ A gift is something that is freely given, “without money and without price” (Isaiah 55:1). If it could be purchased, then it would not be a gift. All the purchasing was done by our Redeemer on the cross. He paid it all! We do not deserve this gift and we can never merit it, but God freely and graciously offers it to sinful men.

Peter is telling Simon that he would “perish,” along with his money. “Perish” (to be destroyed) is a very strong word. It is used, in its verbal form, of the eternal destiny of unbelievers (John 3:16; 10:28; Luke 13:3,5; 1 Cor. 1:18; 2 Cor. 2:15; 2 Thess. 2:10; and 2 Peter 3:9). It is hard to imagine Peter using this word to describe Simon's destiny if Simon were a genuine believer.

Acts 8:22-23

It was not too late for Simon to get right with God. It was not too late for him to repent. He had not committed the unpardonable sin. He could still be saved and pardoned. He needed to genuinely repent and he needed to genuinely believe. His false profession could be replaced by a conversion that was genuine, but it would require true repentance.¹⁹ Often what we have today is “profession without possession, conversion without repentance, and religion without the Holy Spirit.”²⁰ The “gall of bitterness” (compare Deuteronomy 29:18 with Hebrews 12:15) and the “bond (bondage) of iniquity” are expressions that characterize unsaved people. Simon was bitter because the ministry of Philip and the Apostles caused him to lose his influence and power over the people, and he was deeply jealous over what they accomplished. Simon was also in the bond of iniquity, a slave to his own sin: “His own iniquities entrap the wicked man, and he is caught in the cords of his sin” (Prov. 5:22, NKJV).

Acts 8:24

Simon's response was absolutely pathetic: “Pray to the Lord for me that none of these things which you have spoken come upon me.” That was not true repentance. He was not concerned about his

¹⁸J. B. Phillips freely and coarsely renders it, “To hell with you and your money.” That is, both you and your money can go to destruction. Literal translation: “Thy silver be with thee into perdition.”

¹⁹For the meaning of true Biblical repentance see <http://www.middletonbiblechurch.org/salvatio/termsrep.htm>

²⁰John Phillips, *Exploring Acts*, p. 157.

sin, but only about the consequences he might face. He was saying, “I do not want to get hurt! I do not want to suffer consequences for what I have done.” We have millions of people in America who are in institutions called “penitentiaries.” Supposedly once they enter these places they will become penitent. Really? Millions of these people are sad, frustrated and angry, but very few are penitent. The fear of suffering serious consequences due to sin does not automatically bring genuine faith and repentance. So as far as the record goes, Simon never believed unto eternal life.

He [Simon] was alarmed. He trembled like the demons, who believe and tremble. There is no confession from his lips, no self-judgment. He does not exhibit confidence in the Lord nor does he ask for forgiveness. He was not moved by repentance, but only by fear. We do not read anything again of him in the Word of God.²¹

Acts 8:25

What a marvelous door of opportunity was opened as the gospel went to many Samaritan villages. Churches were planted throughout Samaria (see Acts 9:31 and 15:3). The prediction of the Lord came true: “Woman (of Samaria), believe Me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father....But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth” (John 4:21,23). This true worship could even take place in Samaria! The early Church would have been shocked to learn that believers could worship God apart from the holy city of Jerusalem, where for centuries Jewish people were told to gather for worship and to observe certain feasts three times every year.

Peter and John, possibly also accompanied by Philip, returned to Jerusalem, but on the way back preached the gospel in many Samaritan villages. This is the last mention we have of the Apostle John in the book of Acts. With the exception of the book of Galatians (2:9), his name is mentioned later only in the book of Revelation. Men with valuable and fruitful ministries are not always highlighted on the pages of Holy Scripture. God is all-wise in what He includes and what He omits.

Acts 8:26

Philip now launches into a whole new ministry. What a privilege this man received from God, namely, to be a God-sent evangelist. God could have sent one of the twelve Apostles to Samaria, and later to the desert, but God chose to send Philip. An angel of the Lord spoke with divine authority and directed Philip.²² The “south” is the Negev, the southern desert. Gaza was the last oasis, fifty miles south of Jerusalem, on the way to Egypt.

God’s leading of His believers is wonderful. He knows what He is doing even though it may seem strange to us. God led Philip away from a very fruitful evangelistic campaign in Samaria to minister *to one man*. He led him away from a populated city to a deserted place. May God help each of us

²¹Arno C. Gabelein, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pages 152-153.

²²“An angel of the Lord,” not “the angel of the Lord.” The angel of the Lord (the pre-incarnate Christ) became incarnated, and we do not hear that term “an angel of the Lord” used of the Lord Jesus in the New Testament.

to be God's man or woman, in God's place, at God's time, with God's message for those individuals who have had their hearts prepared by God! Notice that the angel directed Philip to the right place but did not preach for him. The preaching of the gospel has been entrusted to men, not angels.

What we have here in Acts 8 is the first Gentile outreach.²³ It was not official because the official outreach to Gentiles would come later in Acts 10 as Peter would open the door of faith to them. But here in Acts 8 we have one African man being reached with the gospel, and this African could then return to his country bringing good news to others. This was the beginning of what would become a thriving Church in North Africa.

Acts 8:27

The conversion of this Ethiopian man is the first of three highly significant conversions recorded in these chapters, in some sense representing all of humanity:

- 1) The Ethiopian Eunuch, descendant of Ham (Acts chapter 8)
- 2) Saul of Tarsus, descendant of Shem (Acts chapter 9)
- 3) Cornelius the Gentile, a Roman, descendant of Japheth (Acts chapter 10)

Where was Ethiopia? As far as the Greeks and Romans were concerned, this territory was considered the end of the world (see Acts 1:8). Today this territory is the northern part of Sudan, south of Egypt (not the present country we call Ethiopia).²⁴ It was the region known as Nubia, south of Aswan. In the future we are told that Ethiopians will turn to the Lord (Psalm 68:31). This man was a eunuch of great authority under Candace. Candace was not a proper name, but a title like the term "Pharaoh" or "Caesar." She was a queen mother of the Ethiopians, having great power in that kingdom. This eunuch was in charge of all her treasures (Secretary of the Treasury), and he had come to Jerusalem to worship.

In what sense was he a eunuch? Homer Kent comments:

The term "eunuch" was used in two senses. In Matthew 19:12 it is used of physically castrated men, or of those who are born without sexual capacity. Such persons often served as harem keepers in the ancient world and some rose to high government positions. In the LXX (Greek version of the OT), however, the term *eunouchos* was used of Potiphar who was married (Gen. 39:1), and hence the sense of "court officer" must be intended, without the additional idea of physical impairment. One cannot, therefore, be certain whether or not the Ethiopian was a physical eunuch.²⁵

²³A Gentile in one sense as a citizen of a Gentile nation, but a Jew in another sense, as a proselyte, as suggested by his visit to Jerusalem.

²⁴This was ancient Nubia, the area from Aswan in southern Egypt to Khartoum, Sudan [*Bible Knowledge Commentary, NT*, p. 374].

²⁵Homer Kent, *Jerusalem to Rome* [BMH Books], p. 81.

Acts 8:28

This man was a sincere seeker (Jer. 23:19; Isa. 55:6; Heb. 11:6). His was a noble search for the truth of the living God in Holy Scripture. He had traveled all the way to Jerusalem, God's appointed city. If the Jews had been the witnesses God intended (Isa. 43:10), then this man would have been exposed to the truth of God and pointed in the right direction. Jerusalem at this time, however, was in a pathetic spiritual condition, the Jews having recently murdered their Messiah. The word "returning" has a sad connotation, indicating that even though he went to Jerusalem he did not find what he was seeking. Perhaps he picked up the Isaiah scroll in Jerusalem, in which case his search was not totally in vain.

Some suppose that the eunuch was a Jewish proselyte. However, if he had been castrated, then he would be disqualified from being a full proselyte, for such were denied access to the sanctuary (Deut. 23:1).

There is a fascinating prophecy in Isaiah 56 which has relevance to this African eunuch: "Neither let the son of the stranger [a Gentile] that hath joined himself to the LORD [as a proselyte of the gate, like Cornelius], speak, saying, The LORD hath utterly separated me from His people; neither let the eunuch say, Behold I am a dry tree" (Isaiah 56:3). Don't let a Gentile say, "I am totally outside the realm of God's love and God's grace and God's salvation." And if you are a eunuch, don't ever say, "I am a dry tree. I am hopeless. God has no place for me." In the law of Moses we learn that no eunuch had access to the tabernacle or later the Temple. So eunuchs had a reason to feel excluded. Gentiles or eunuchs could not approach God's holy place. But what did God say about these kinds of people? "For thus saith the LORD unto the eunuchs that keep my sabbaths, and choose the things that please me, and take hold of my covenant; even unto them will I give in mine house and within my walls a place and a name better than of sons and of daughters. I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off" (Isaiah 56:4-5). Thank you Lord! It is interesting that the eunuch was reading this very book of Isaiah when Philip found him. There is great hope for eunuchs. Verses 6-7 speak of Gentile worshippers: "Also the sons of the stranger, that join themselves to the LORD, to serve Him, and to love the name of the LORD, to be His servants, every one that keepeth the sabbath from polluting it, and taketh hold of My covenant, even them will I bring to My holy mountain and make them joyful in My house of prayer: their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be accepted upon Mine altar; for Mine house shall be called a house of prayer *for all people.*"

One of the major problem the Jews had at the time of Christ was that they thought of themselves as the exclusive, rightful recipients of God's eternal blessings. They considered everybody else to be excluded, unless they become proselytes. God is not a respecter of persons. God does respect what a person's heart response to His Word is, and this is what determines a person's eternal destiny. But the outward circumstances of our lives is not a factor in the mind of God, and does not exclude an individual from eternal blessing. This eunuch was a candidate for salvation, thanks to the far-reaching and nondiscriminating grace of God!

Acts 8:29

Here we have an angel replaced by the Holy Spirit. An angel directed Philip to Gaza (8:26); the Holy Spirit directed him to join this eunuch in his chariot. When it comes to personal evangelism, how we need to be directed by the Holy Spirit and led by Him! Although the eunuch is the only

person mentioned, it is most probable that there were others traveling with him.

Acts 8:30-31

Philip made haste to obey the Holy Spirit's leading. He literally ran to the chariot! Dr. Donald Fullerton was my [John Whitcomb's] spiritual father who led me to the Lord many years ago on the campus of Princeton University when I was a godless evolutionist.²⁶ He came to my dorm room one night and led me to the Savior. Later he said, "Come with me and we will visit some of the other dormitory rooms and talk to some students about the Lord." Do you know what my deep desire and hope and prayer was when he knocked on the doors? My desperate hope was that no one would answer! I did not want any more insults, confrontations, rejections. But Philip had a different attitude. He ran to the chariot! May our feet be swift to run to do His will!

Philip heard this eunuch reading from the sacred Scriptures, and his first question was, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The eunuch's response, "How can I understand unless some man should guide me?" What an amazing statement! How we need a teacher! We must not wait around hoping for a personal revelation. One of the disastrous aspects of the Charismatic Movement is that it sometimes fosters the attitude that we do not really need the Bible. God, they believe, will talk to us supernaturally and directly by visions or dreams or prophecies. We don't really need to study the Bible. But God says that "faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17). We must not set the Word of God aside under the false pretense of going directly to the Lord. The eunuch needed a teacher, and Jesus, in the Great Commission said, "Teaching them to observe all things which I have commanded" (Matt. 28:19-20). The responsibility of the teaching lies with us, His servants. In Acts chapter 4 an angel delivered the apostles out of prison and said, "Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life" (Acts 5:20). Go back and tell the people! Did the apostles give this reply to the angel, "If we do that, we will get in trouble again; why don't you tell them?" How many of us would like to vote for angels to carry out our work and ministry? No, we are the ones who must tell people, even if we must endure potential insults, rejections, and even fierce persecutions. Indeed, more people have died for Jesus Christ on this planet in the last hundred years than all previous centuries combined. People are dying all over the world because they are Christians. This is stark reality. Jesus said, You teach them! Philip would teach this man, being God's man in the right place, at the right time, with the right message from God's inspired Scriptures.

Acts 8:32-33

In the wonderful providence of God, this man was reading from Isaiah 53, one of the key prophecies of Scripture which foretold the Messiah's suffering and death for the sins of men. It was Philip's privilege to start teaching this man from such a wonderful passage. So also, may we ever teach Christ and Him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2)! This seeking man was reading from Isaiah 53:7-8.²⁷ This was a wonderful example of God-centered evangelism, where God was working in the heart of Philip to be a Spirit-filled vessel to point a man to Christ, and also working in the heart of this lost Ethiopian to prepare him to receive the Word of truth.

²⁶For Dr. Whitcomb's personal testimony see *The Conversion of an Evolutionist* at whitcombministries.org.

²⁷He was reading from the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint).

Acts 8:34

A suffering Messiah was unthinkable to this African proselyte, and to most Jews, including the Twelve prior to the cross. To this day most Jews do not know what Isaiah 53 is saying and they do not know of whom the prophet is speaking. How sad is this veil which is over their hearts (2 Cor. 3:14-16). Isaiah chapter 53 is speaking of the suffering servant, and many Jewish unbelieving scholars identify the suffering servant as Israel, knowing that Israel as a nation has been afflicted and persecuted throughout the centuries. However, in reading the passage, this interpretation of “the suffering nation” is impossible. For example, consider verse 6. How could the iniquities and sins of Israel be laid on Israel? It makes no sense. The perfect Servant in Isaiah is the Lord Jesus, not Israel. Philip had the right answer. He preached unto him Jesus. He knew that the prophet Isaiah was speaking of Jesus, the great Sin-Bearer, God’s only Savior.

How remarkable were the actions and conduct of the suffering Servant! The Lord Jesus, when confronted by Caiaphas and Pontius Pilate, never became angry and never lost His temper. He graciously and authoritatively and truthfully told them who He was. He never reacted to the pain inflicted upon Him. When He was crucified He never cried out in pain or in anger against His tormenters. Even the centurion stood amazed and said, “Truly this was the Son of God” (Matt. 27:54). The centurion, who had witnessed many such deaths, had never seen anyone who responded and reacted to crucifixion as this Man did.

Acts 8:35

Philip began at that very Scripture (Isaiah chapter 53) and preached unto him Jesus. How interesting it would have been if God had directed Luke to record Philip’s Christ-centered evangelistic message given to this man! What Old Testament Scriptures did he use? How long did he witness to him? What did he tell the eunuch about Christ? God in His wisdom merely summarized the entire encounter by saying “he preached unto him Jesus.” Perhaps one reason God did not allow the content of Philip’s preaching to be recorded is that the Lord desires His evangelists to be Spirit-led, and not follow the same pattern of witnessing every time. When dealing with lost sinners, every situation is different. God knows the needs of each heart. While the basic facts of the gospel never change, God can guide us to adopt the proper approach for each individual person. The approach Peter took with Simon the Sorcerer (Acts 8:20-24) was quite different from the approach Philip took with this Ethiopian who had a seeking heart. Some today might think it is essential to always follow the “Four Spiritual Laws” or the “Romans Road.” However, the Lord wants us to be flexible to share from God’s Word whatever it is that the Spirit wants the needy sinner to hear. If God had recorded Philip’s presentation, then today we might think we should present the gospel in the very same way Philip did. However, the person we are witnessing to may need to hear the truth in a different way. How we need to be filled with the Spirit and depend fully upon His unfailing leading in every individual case!

From the next verse we learn that Philip’s message must have included some instruction concerning water baptism, indicating that Philip was fully aware of our Lord’s Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20).

Acts 8:36-38

In Judaism there was a practice called proselyte baptism. John the Baptist practiced another type of

baptism, a baptism of repentance unto the remission of sins. There is also Christian baptism which was instituted by Christ in His Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20). It was practiced for the first time on the day of Pentecost when about three thousand were saved and baptized (Acts 2:41). Philip administered Christian baptism to this man. It was an outward, symbolic act of recognition of the three Persons of the Godhead, the second of whom was Jesus, the Son of God, the One spoken about in Isaiah 53.

The fact that the eunuch commanded the chariot to stand still indicates that they were traveling all the time Philip was witnessing to this man. They both went down into the water, suggesting that the mode of baptism was immersion, not sprinkling.²⁸ What did water baptism accomplish for the eunuch? It was an act of obedience which did not add to his salvation. It also did not confer any spiritual gift, but it was an outward testimony of his inward faith. He obeyed the one thing that Jesus told us to do in His Great Commission. This Gentile eunuch, through faith in Christ, became a 100% genuine member of the body and bride of Christ, thanks to the ministry of a dedicated layman named Philip! We must wait until Acts chapter 10 to find the *official* recognition of Gentile faith in Jesus as sufficient for full acceptance by God through the ministry of Peter. But the eunuch had everything he needed from Scripture to give him the full assurance of his salvation and the knowledge that he belonged to the Lord Jesus Christ. And he had a wonderful message that he could take to Candace the queen and to the whole kingdom of Ethiopia. We would love to have further information about what happened when he returned to his country.

It was decades ago that some of those in our Grace Brethren fellowship of churches felt the call of God to go to the Central African Republic, a landlocked, poverty-stricken, spiritually dark land. As far as they knew, the gospel had never reached to that place. Philip's convert came from a land (Sudan) next to the Central African Republic, to the northeast of it. When our missionaries first went there, in the early 1920's, and led some people to the Lord, those people had the audacity to say, "Where have you people been for the last 1800 years? What happened to that gospel outreach? Why did it never get to us until now?" These were very fascinating and, in fact, terrifying questions. Today the Sudan is one of the greatest disaster places on this planet when it comes to killing Christians.

Acts 8:39

Philip was caught up by the Spirit of God and the eunuch went away rejoicing, a common heartfelt emotion shared by those who truly receive Christ and are saved (note the Philippian jailer in Acts 16:34). The eunuch was not the only one rejoicing on this day because we know that there is joy and a celebration in heaven over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:7,10). The eunuch had the truth and he knew he had the truth. He had assurance of salvation and he had a message to tell others in his kingdom. The Scriptures tell us nothing more about this Ethiopian man, but according to Irenaeus, who wrote during the last quarter of the second century, he became a missionary to the Ethiopian people.

Suddenly Philip disappeared, somewhat like Enoch (Gen. 5:24). Obadiah feared Elijah would disappear (1 Kings 18:12), and he finally did (2 Kings 2:16). It would be fascinating to have a video

²⁸See *Topic of Special Interest #2* at the end of this chapter, dealing with the proper Biblical mode of baptism.

of this scene as God took Philip away suddenly. The verb “caught away” [harpazō] is the word that is used of the rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 (“caught up”). The word means “to snatch, seize, take suddenly, carry off by force, seize and carry off speedily, catch away.” It is used of the devil snatching away and removing the seed of the Word that was sown in the heart (Matt. 13:19). It is used of the Jews who wanted to take Christ by force and make Him King (John 6:15). It is used of a wolf who catches and takes away the sheep (John 10:12). It is used of God who will never allow the true believer to be plucked out (removed, taken, snatched) from His hand (John 10:28-29). It is used of Paul who was caught up (snatched up, quickly taken up) to the third heaven or paradise (2 Cor. 12:2,4). It is used in Revelation 12:5 to describe the ascension of Christ (caught up from earth to heaven).

In Philip’s case he was not raptured to heaven, but he was quickly taken and speedily removed from one place (the desert) to another (a city). God has no problem with transportation. Philip’s divinely ordered trip was more efficient and faster than what any modern airline could do. And a more glorious trip lies ahead for every believer who is alive on this earth when Christ comes. At that time we will be suddenly caught up to meet the Lord in the air, and those in America and those in Africa and those in Asia will all meet the Lord at the same time without any delays! What a day of rejoicing that will be.

Acts 8:40

Philip ended up at Azotus or Ashdod, one of the former Philistine cities on the West coast which was twenty miles north of Gaza. And as he continued his travels he preached in all those formerly Philistine cities along the coast. He finally ended up at Caesarea where Peter would be going to meet Cornelius in Acts chapter 10. Philip was there ahead of him. Peter followed Philip to Caesarea, just as he had followed him to Samaria.

Philip, in the midst of his busy evangelistic ministry, was also able to establish a family and make his home in Caesarea (see Acts 21:8-9). Twenty years after the eunuch got saved, Philip was still serving the Lord faithfully in Caesarea and bearing fruit: “The righteous man...will still yield fruit in old age” (Psalm 92:14). What else did Philip do? Did he start a Church in Caesarea? We are not given any further details about this man. But here in Acts 8 God has given us a wonderful glimpse into the beginning of the global outreach of the gospel as it went forth to the Samaritans and then to one Gentile African man through Philip’s faithful ministry.

Special Topic #1

Was Simon the Sorcerer a Saved Man?

Arguments in Favor of Simon Being a Saved Man

The strongest argument in support of Simon being a saved man is found in Acts 8:13 where we are told that “Simon himself believed also; and when he was baptized, he continued with Philip.” This man believed and was baptized. Other Samaritans believed and were baptized (Acts 8:12), and we have no reason to doubt their salvation.

Since faith is the one condition for salvation (Acts 16:30-31), it is assumed that Simon the Sorcerer must have been a saved man.

Arguments Against Simon Being a Saved Man

1) Not all faith is saving faith. There are different kinds of belief.

Here are some examples:

A. Luke 8:13 speaks of a temporary faith, of people who “for a while believe.” The faith that is spoken of here is qualified. It is a “for a while” faith or a temporary faith. There is a difference between genuine saving faith and faith that is spurious and short-lived.

It’s important to realize that the stony-ground hearer was in that condition from the start. When the seed was scattered, it did not first fall on good ground, which at a later time became stony and bad. The ground was stony and bad from the start (Matt. 13:5). It was never good ground. There were never any roots. The rock ledge was there from the beginning. This is contrary to the teaching of some who say that at the beginning everything was fine and that the person truly believed on the Lord Jesus, and that this faith was good and valid. It was not good and valid. Even from the very beginning this faith had no roots. Even from the beginning the conditions were not suitable for a good reception of the Word.

Thus Walvoord says that “the seed on shallow ground pictured superficial reception of the Word” (*Matthew*, page 99). Ryrice pointed out that some believers think that “carnality can be lifelong and so total that carnal believers will never bear any fruit and yet be genuinely saved. But that is not true, for all believers will bear fruit, some thirty-, some sixty-, and some one hundred-fold (Matthew 13:8). Otherwise, they do not possess the new life” (*So Great Salvation*, p. 59).

Arno Gaebelein speaks of the rocky ground: “It is the great class of professing Christians. They are covering over this old, desperately wicked heart with a little earth. They put on the form of godliness, while they know nothing of its power. There is also a great deal of enthusiasm, a springing up of the seed; it looks almost as if there is to be a great result—but alas! There is only the name to live, but death is behind it” (*Matthew*, pages 272-273). Gaebelein thus taught that the “stony ground” hearer

represented an unbeliever. F.W. Grant in his *Numerical Bible* takes the same position.

Homer Kent taught the same (see his Matthew commentary in *Wycliffe Bible Commentary*). Here is what L.S. Chafer said about this parable (*Systematic Theology*, Vol. III, page 296): “Whatever seeming reality may be attached to the experience of those who are represented by that which fell by the wayside, or by seed that fell in stony places, or by seed that fell among thorns, the determining test is that these did not mature into wheat, as did the seed which fell into good ground.... That Word does move many superficially, but those who are saved by it are likened to wheat.” He describes the other three types of ground (hard, stony and thorny) as “the three failures.” See also William Kelly’s discussion of the Luke 8 passage in *The Gospel of Luke*, pages 125-126.

B) 1 Corinthians 15:2. Some believed, but they did not hold fast to the gospel which Paul preached. Paul describes this type of faith as being “in vain.” They believed in vain. Their belief falls short of saving faith. “The Apostle is not implying that some of the Corinthian believers were lost for want of faith; rather it is that their faith has never been sufficient for salvation” (Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. III, page 296).

C) John 2:23. There were many who “believed in His Name when they saw the miracles which He did.” [Compare Simon’s fascination with the miracles of the apostles in Acts 8:13.] Was this saving faith or did it come short of saving faith? It was a faith based on miracles which they saw. This faith, which was based on miracles, came short of saving faith for two reasons: 1) Even though they believed in Him, He did not believe in them (same verb used)! He did not commit Himself to them (v. 24). He knew what was in them. He could see right past their shallow faith. 2) One of these people who had a faith based on miracles was Nicodemus (3:1-2): “We know that thou art a teacher come from God; for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.” This faith that he had did not measure up to saving faith. The Lord told him he must be born again.

D) John 8:31. Jesus spoke to those Jews who believed on Him. Is this describing saving faith? Perhaps it is, but this passage has always puzzled me. In verse 33 who does the “they” refer to? It must refer to people who heard him say, “The truth shall make you free” because they took up on this and said, “We were never in bondage to any man.” But as you read verses 33-44 it is obvious that these are unsaved Jews who were very antagonistic to Christ (“ye are of your father the devil” etc.). If we say that those in verse 31 were true believers, then how do we explain the following context? Homer Kent sees this same problem: “This raises the question of whether it was true saving faith....No clear transition can be seen here between different groups of Jews....Apparently the sense is that these who believed in Jesus had come to a sort of mental acceptance, but not to any personal trust” (*Light in the Darkness*, page 126).

E) James 2:14-26 speaks of a “dead faith” which is fruitless and of demons “who believe and tremble.” James makes the point that a true believer will demonstrate his faith by his works. Charles Ryrie said it this way:

James 2:24 [“Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only”] is the reply to the question of James 2:14. Unproductive faith cannot save, because it is not genuine faith. Faith and works are like a two-coupon ticket to heaven. The coupon of works is not good for passage, and the coupon of faith is not valid if detached from works” (*Ryrie Study Bible*, comment under James 2:24).

In thinking about “dead faith” it is helpful to connect this with the “dead works” mentioned in Hebrews 6:1 and 9:14. “Dead works” are works flowing from the flesh which is stamped with death, by which one seeks to establish himself before God. Such works never had “life.” They were not once alive and then “died.” No, they have always been “dead” (without life or spirit). Likewise the same can be said of “dead faith” (James 2), which is of mere human origin, flowing from the flesh which is stamped with death. Such “faith” never had “life,” or was not once alive and then “died.” Such faith has always been “dead” (without life or spirit). “As the body without the spirit [without life] is dead, so faith without works [without life] is dead” (James 2:26).

Conclusion: When the Scripture says that Simon believed, it is possible that his faith was deficient and did not reach the level of genuine saving faith. The Acts 8 passage clearly points to the fact that Simon was greatly impressed and believed because of the miracles that were performed (much like the “believers” in John 2:23 who, like Nicodemus, believed in the miracles but were not born again). John Rutherford describes the faith of Simon in this way: “It is an indication of the nature of the faith which he possessed in the gospel—wondering amazement at a new phenomenon not yet understood, not repentance or trust in Christ” (*The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, Vol. IV, page 2796).

2. Simon did not understand salvation or the grace of God.

From the very beginning Simon did not understand salvation and did not understand the grace of God. He thought God’s gift could be purchased with money (Acts 8:18-20). Simon, as a sorcerer, had great power over people (Acts 8:9-10) and he wanted to continue to have such power in the Christian realm. He seemed to be envious of the way God was using the apostles (Acts 8:18-19). He did not demonstrate the broken and contrite spirit of a man who was simply thankful to be a sinner saved by grace. He demonstrated a fear of judgment (Acts 8:24), but no genuine repentance. He was told to repent of his wickedness (Acts 8:22), but there is no indication that he ever did.

3. The words of Peter seem extremely harsh and strong for anyone but a wicked unbeliever (Acts 8:20-23).

“But Peter said unto him, Thy money **perish with thee**, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money. **Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter:** for thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee. For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity” (Acts 8:20-23, emphasis mine).

“Thy money perish with thee”—this implies that Simon was going to perish. Literal translation: “Thy silver be with thee into perdition.” When does the Bible ever describe a true believer as one who is going to perish? Compare 1 Corinthians 1:18; 2 Corinthians 2:15. On the contrary, the Bible clearly teaches that true believers will not perish (John 3:15-16; John 10:28).

“Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter”—Peter had just been talking about God’s gift of salvation, and if Simon had no part in that he must be unsaved. He had no part in the fellowship of the saved.

Peter was given great discernment by the Lord to understand the true heart of Simon (even as Paul

was later given discernment to understand the heart of Elymas the sorcerer, Acts 13:6-11). Peter knew that his heart was not right in the sight of God.

Simon was poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity (Acts 8:23). How could such a description fit a saved person? The saved person has been set free and redeemed from all iniquity or lawlessness (Tit. 2:14; Rom. 6:17-18).

4. What can we learn about Simon from church history?

Although the Bible only devotes part of one chapter to this man, the Church Fathers (Justin Martyr, Jerome, Origen, Irenaeus, etc.) had much more to say about him. Their writings described his heretical views and his self promotion. He is known in history as Simon Magus, “magus” being a term which means sorcerer or magician. We are more familiar with the word in its plural form, “magi,” as a description of the wise men. Simon had followers called “Simonians” and they held certain Gnostic errors. Many consider Simon to be one of the chief originators of Gnosticism. Philip Schaff wrote, “The author, or first representative of this baptized heathenism, according to the uniform testimony of Christian antiquity, is Simon Magus, who unquestionably adulterated Christianity with pagan ideas and practices, and gave himself out, in pantheistic style, for an emanation of God” (*History of the Christian Church*, Volume 1, page 566). In the legends about Simon he is seen as being in constant opposition to the Apostle Peter. In other words, he was not known for being a friend of the Church.

Simon and his sin is immortalized in our vocabulary. The word “simony” indicates the crime of buying or selling a spiritual office for a price in money.

5. What have Bible students have said about Simon the Sorcerer?

C. I. Scofield, in *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth*, agrees that Simon was a mere professor, not a genuine possessor. In the final chapter of this booklet (“Believers and Professors”) Scofield has this heading: “BELIEVERS ARE SAVED, MERE PROFESSORS ARE LOST.” The first example he gives of a mere “pretender” is that of Simon.

Homer Kent observed, “In all likelihood his belief (8:13) was only superficial and not true saving faith, as the following reasons indicate. (1) His belief seems to have been based upon the miracles which he beheld (vs. 13), and could be mere intellectual assent. Jesus usually discounted that kind of faith (John 2:23-25; 6:26,66). It is true that the same word was used for “believe” of Simon and the rest of the Samaritans, but the context must indicate the content of the belief. (2) Simon is contrasted to the others throughout the account. (3) The particular type of rebuke given to Simon makes it doubtful that he was saved. “Thy silver be with thee into perdition” (literal translation). “Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter.” “Thy heart is not right.” The expression “gall of bitterness and bond of iniquity” was OT terminology descriptive of the most serious offenses (Deut. 29:18,20). (4) Simon exhibited no personal sense of sin, but only a fear of judgment. (5) The consistent testimony of Church tradition associates Simon Magus with heresy. Justin Martyr, who lived about 100 years later in Samaria, said Simon became a Gnostic” (*Jerusalem to Rome*, p. 80).²⁹

²⁹Stanley D. Toussaint gives seven reasons why Simon was probably not a true believer [*Bible Knowledge Commentary, NT*, page 373].

F. F. Bruce: “The nature of his [Simon’s] belief must remain uncertain. No doubt it was sincere as far as it went, but was very superficial and unsatisfactory. Jesus Himself, we are told in John 2:23f., attached little value to the faith that rested on miracles alone” (*The Book of the Acts*, p. 179).

Arno C. Gaebelein wrote of Simon’s total misunderstanding of salvation:

“Thy money perish with thee!” The sorcerer with his wicked heart thought that the Gift of God could be purchased with money. In this the aim was the Gospel itself. Salvation and all that is connected with it, including the Spirit, is the Gift of God, without money and without price; it cannot be earned nor bought. He had no part nor lot in this matter. And this is true of all who in the depravity of their hearts think of obtaining the power of God by what they do. He sees himself uncovered and exposed “in the gall of bitterness and bond of iniquity” in spite of his outward profession, his baptism and association with Philip. (*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 152).

Charles Ryrie’s brief comment in his *Study Bible* under Acts 8:13 is of interest: “*Simon himself believed also*. Peter’s denunciation in verses 20-23 indicates that Simon’s faith was not unto salvation (James 2:14-20).”

Harry Ironside: “We see in Simon a baptized man, a religious professor, who had not been regenerated” (*Acts*, p. 107; see also his earlier discussion on page 106).

John Phillips: “Simon’s faith was spurious from the start. He was not won by Philip’s message but by Philip’s miracles. He ‘believed,’ it says. But *what* did he believe? Whatever it was he believed, it did not regenerate his soul. He was as lost after he ‘believed’ as he was before he ‘believed,’ as the sequel of the story makes clear...What Simon Magus coveted was not the Master but the miracles, not the Savior but the signs” (*Exploring Acts*, page 152-153).

William MacDonald: “It seems that Simon had not been born again. He was a professor but not a possessor” (p. 1605). MacDonald continues:

Peter’s answer indicates that Simon was not a truly converted man: 1. “**Your money perish with you.**” No believer will ever *perish* (John 3:16). 2. “**You have neither part nor portion in this matter**”; in other words, he was not in the fellowship. 3. “**Your heart is not right in the sight of God.**” This is a fitting description of an unsaved person. 4. “**You are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity.**” Could these words be true of a regenerate person? (*Believer’s Bible Commentary*, p. 1606).

Conclusion

Although the Scripture clearly says that Simon “believed,” everything else that Acts 8 tells us about this man indicates that his faith did not reach the level of saving faith. He believed because of the miracles which he saw, but he did not believe to the saving of his soul.

Special Topic #2

The Mode of Water Baptism

Why Baptism by Immersion is the Proper Biblical Mode

This paper demonstrates that baptism by immersion is the proper Biblical mode for water baptism. The other modes of baptism that are practiced by churches are baptism by sprinkling or baptism by pouring.

1. The term “baptize” [*baptismō*] demands baptism by immersion.

The Greek Lexicons are unanimous that this Greek verb means “to dip, to immerse.” Consider the following examples:

Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words by W. E. Vine: to dip, used among the Greeks to signify the dyeing of a garment, used of the drawing of wine by dipping the cup into the bowl.

Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament by Arndt and Gingrich: to dip, to immerse.

Critical Lexicon and Concordance by E. W. Bullinger: to dip or dye, to immerse.

Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament by Thayer: to dip repeatedly, to immerse, submerge, used of vessels sunk, an immersion in water.

Biblico-Theological Lexicon of New Testament Greek by Cremer: to immerse, submerge.

Greek-English Lexicon by Liddell and Scott: to dip, plunge, to be drowned, of ships that are sunk, dyeing garments, dipping in water, immersion, of water being drawn by dipping vessels.

The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament by Moulton and Milligan: Used of a submerged boat.

Other uses by ancient Greek writers:

It was used of an iron-headed spear being plunged into a sword-fish [*Polybius, History, book XXXIV. C. 3, 7*].

[Speaking of an underground channel] “And to one who hurls down a dart, from above into the channel, the force of the water makes so much resistance, that it is hardly **immersed**.” [*Strabo, Geography, book XII. Ch. 2, 4*].

[Speaking of the march of Alexander’s army] “They marched the whole day in water, **immersed** as far as to the waist.” [*Strabo, Geography, book XIV. Ch. 3, 9*].

[Describing the murderous drowning of a boy] “Continually pressing down and **immersing** him while swimming, as if in sport they did not desist till they had entirely suffocated him.” [*Josephus, Jewish Antiquities, book XV. Ch. 3, 3*] Note: Again and again Greek writers use this verb to describe sunken ships (totally submerged or immersed in water) and people drowning under water as in this case.

[Used of a sword so plunged into warm blood as to be heated by it] “Similar also is that: ‘And the whole sword was warmed with blood.’ For truly in this he exhibits very great emphasis; as if the sword were so **imbathed** (baptized), as to be heated.” [*On the Life and Poetry of Homer, II. 26*].

[Of a man killing himself] “And stretching out the right hand, so as to be unseen by none, he **plunged** the whole sword into his own neck.” [*Josephus, Jewish War, book II. Ch. 18, 4*]

“*Baptizo* is used in Classical Greek of a blacksmith who immerses a piece of hot iron in water, tempering it. Also, of Greek soldiers placing the points of their swords, and barbarians the points of their spears, in a vat of blood. E.g., Xenophon in the 4th cent. BC tells of Spartan soldiers dipping their spears into pig’s blood before going into battle. By identifying the spears with blood, the nature of the spear was transformed from a hunting tool to an instrument of warfare.” [*An Eternal Identity, Rick Webb, page 2*]

[Of a cloth dipped in oil and then lit on fire] “A certain man, having a grudge against a fox for some mischief done by her, after getting her into his power contrived a long time how to punish her; and **dipping** tow [yarn or cloth made of tow] in oil, he bound it to her tail and set fire to it.” [*Aesopic Fables; Fable of the Man and the Fox*]

For scores of other examples, see *The Meaning and Use of Baptizein* by T. J. Conant. [Kregel Publications, 1977]

This Greek verb is used in the Septuagint in 2 Kings 5:14: “And Naaman went down, and **immersed** himself in the Jordan, seven times.”

The Reformers understood the meaning of the term (even though many if not most Reformed churches today do not practice baptism by immersion):

Luther, *On the Sacrament of Baptism*: “First, the name *baptism* is Greek; in Latin it can be rendered immersion, when we immerse any thing into water, that it may be all covered with water. And although that custom has now grown out of use with most persons (nor do they wholly submerge children, but only pour on a little water), yet they ought to be entirely immersed, and immediately drawn out. For this the etymology of the name seems to demand.”

Calvin, *Institution of the Christian Religion*, Book IV. Ch. 15; On Baptism, 19 (*at the end*). “Though the word baptize itself signifies immerse, and it is certain that the rite of immersion was observed by the ancient church.”

It should be noted that in the King James Version (and many other versions), the term “baptize” is not translated, but the Greek verb is merely transliterated. To transliterate means to print a Greek word using the closest corresponding letters in English. Another example of a Greek word transliterated is the word “angel” [Greek=*angelos*]. The word means “messenger.” So a transliteration would be, “The angel said...” A translation would be, “The messenger said...” So also for the word “baptize.” A transliteration would be, “He was baptized.” A translation would be, “He was immersed.”

2. If the mode of baptism were sprinkling or pouring, then why didn’t God use words that mean sprinkling or pouring when speaking of water baptism?

There is a Greek word for **sprinkling** (*rhantizō*). See Hebrews 9:13 where it is used of the sprinkling of blood. The noun (*rhantismos*) is used in Hebrews 12:24 and 1 Peter 1:2 of the sprinkling of the blood of Christ. But this word is never used of water baptism. There are several Greek words for **pouring** [see Vine’s *Expository Dictionary of New Testament words* under “pour”], but none of these words is used for water baptism. These Greek words for sprinkling or pouring are not used to describe water baptism because they are not appropriate descriptions of immersion.

3. In the New Testament, when people were baptized, they went into the water and then they came out of the water, suggesting baptism by immersion.

“And were baptized (immersed) of (by) him in the Jordan” (Matt. 3:6; see Mark 1:5).

“And Jesus, when (after) He was baptized, **went up** straightway **out of the water**” (Matt. 3:13—speaking of John the Baptist baptizing Jesus).

“I indeed baptized (immersed) you in water” (Mark 1:8; see verse 9).

“And John was baptizing in Aenon near to Salim, **because there was much water there**; and they came and were **baptized** (immersed)” (John 3:23). Note: John’s baptism was not the same as Christian baptism, but the mode was the same. John’s baptism involved total immersion and Christian baptism involved total immersion. You do not need “much water” to sprinkle or to pour, but you do need “much water” to immerse (to put a person totally under the water). Sprinkling would require only a cup of water; pouring would only require a pitcher of water; immersion requires “much water.”

“And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and **they went down both into the water**, both Philip and the eunuch; and he **baptized** (immersed, submerged) him. And when they were **come up out of the water**, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip” (Acts 8:38-39). Notice that they were both in the water (perhaps waist deep) and then Philip immersed him (put him entirely under the water).

Conclusion: The meaning of the Greek term, its usage in the New Testament, its usage in Greek writings, and the symbolic significance of water baptism, all argue clearly and conclusively that the Biblical mode for baptism is immersion.

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Triune Immersion takes place when the baptismal candidate is immersed three times to represent the Tri-Unity of God as reflected in the Great Commission’s baptismal command (Matt. 28:19-20). “The early Church practiced Triune Immersion as the mode for baptism which beautifully and accurately pictures the doctrine of the Trinity, with the unity of the Godhead being represented along with distinctions between the three Persons.”³⁰

Dr. Whitcomb believes “the practice of Triune Immersion proves itself to be the best and most complete way to carry out all that the Scriptures command in relation to the rite of baptism.”³¹ For further study on single vs. Triune Immersion, read *Could It Be Three?* by Timothy Hodge.³²

³⁰Timothy Hodge, *Could It Be Three?*, (Winona Lake, CE National, Incorporated, 1999), page 31.

³¹Timothy Hodge, p.31.

³²Timothy Hodge, *Could It Be Three?*, (Winona Lake, CE National, Incorporated, 1999).