

THE PURE AND THE PHONY

Acts 8:1-25

The book of Acts is often a study in contrasts. We have been seeing a contrast between the inner struggles of the church versus the outward struggles of the church. This chapter continues some of those contrasts.

THE PERSECUTION OF THE CHURCH

And Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

And some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him.

But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house; and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.

Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word. (Acts 8:1-4).

The last chapter closes with the martyrdom of Stephen. The church has already been under some persecution, but until now there had been a boundary line beyond which the Jewish authorities had not been willing to cross. This was now changed. There was a new outlook as it wasn't in favor of the Christians. Notice the adjectives which are used.

- GREAT persecution.
- ALL scattered.
- LOUD lamentation.

Things just weren't bad. They were very bad. Stephen had been executed. Others were being arrested and imprisoned.

Prison isn't a very pleasant place. There were no air conditioners and color televisions in these prisons. They were disease-infested, cold, dark and damp.

When verse 2 says that *some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him*, the passage does not say that these "devout men" were Christians. They may well have been Jews who did not approve of the actions of the Sanhedrin in stoning Stephen. The Mishnah states that when a man who has been stoned is buried, there is to be no mourning on his behalf. These men were in direct violation of the Pharisaic tradition. They did not approve of the decision to murder Stephen, and so they mourned.

This was a reign of terror that precluded all civil rights. Remember Hitler's Gestapo? This was a similar situation. Jewish Christians were being dragged away to concentration camps. Saul of Tarsus was to the Christians what Hitler would be to the Jews (Acts 22:4; 22:19-20; 26:9-11). Saul was a driven man. He was sincere in his persecution of the Christians. But sincerity is no substitute for truth.

As a result, *they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles* (Acts 8:1). By the time Saul was done, the Jerusalem church had shrunk from thousands down to 12 apostles. It sounds like a tragedy. The church that had been so big was now so small.! Had God failed? No! Instead of one big church, there were now hundreds of small ones.

The church in Jerusalem had been enjoying some phenomenal success. It had grown greatly over the years. With this, a new problem had come. It was the problem of complacency. There was no longer any urgency to preach the gospel to other peoples.

To tell you the truth, the believers did not even conceive of taking the gospel to the Gentiles. Indeed, they were not really even interested in taking it to the Jews who lived in other countries. They had become lax. Therefore God will use this persecution to stir up the church and to spread it out to other nations.

This is an important lesson. God is in control when He raises up a work. He is also in control when He tears down a work. When everything is going well, we fall into the trap of worshipping success.

How many missionary reports have you heard that are full of glowing successes? Revivals and mission conferences are presented in such a way that they often glorify the workers instead of the Lord. This can be very intimidating. Not all of us enjoy such apparent success. Often the reverse is true. We are undergoing hardship and failure. This does not mean that God is not working in our lives. Just the opposite. God often works through our failures.

Up to this point, the church had been confined to the area immediately around Jerusalem. The church had become a pot porrei. It sat there and it did good works, but it was not moving out into the world. Now the Lord turns on the heat. The pot pori becomes a pressure cooker. Have you ever seen a pot full of water begin to boil? As the water expands, it doesn't remain in the pot. The church was like that. As the heat was turned up, people began to get out of town. Let's make this practical. How long have you been sitting in your pot? Are you waiting for the Lord to turn up the heat? He will, you know.

Oliver Cromwell sent his men into the Catholic Churches to search for funds for his beleaguered nation. They came back saying, "We found no gold or silver except that which

was in the statues of the saints.”

“Good,” he replied, “we will melt down the saints and put them into circulation.” That is what God did with the persecution of the early church. As a result, *those who had been scattered went abroad preaching the word* (Acts 8:4). This was not the apostles who were doing this preaching. This was everyone except the apostles. There is a lesson here. It is that evangelism is everyone’s responsibility.

It is interesting to note that the word for “scattered” both in verse 1 and in verse 4 is the Greek word διασπειρω. It is a compound word made up of dia (from) and σπειρω, to scatter. What is interesting is that σπειρω is used in Matthew 13 to describe the actions of the sower who goes out and sow his seed, literally, the scatterer who goes out to scatter his seed.

With this persecution, thousands of sowers were deployed throughout the ancient world and they went out scattering their seed. The instrument of this seed dispersing ministry was a young unbeliever named Saul.

THE PREACHING OF PHILIP

And Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them. 6 And the multitudes with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. 7 For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed. 8 And there was much rejoicing in that city. (Acts 8:5-8).

This chapter gives us a transition. It is a pivotal point in the history of the Church. Acts 1:8 didn’t happen until Acts 8:1 happened. When the going got tough, the tough left town. But as they left, they took with them the message of the gospel.

This reflects a dramatic change in the program of God. Up to this time, the knowledge of God had been primarily focused in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the single beacon of light which was to draw all the nations to herself. This is what happened at Pentecost. Jews from all the nations gathered together to meet the Lord.

But this will now all change. Instead of the world coming to the church, now the church will go to the world.

1. The Character of Philip.

Philip is a Greek name. It was a fairly common name among the Greeks and had been ever since the days of Philip the father of Alexander the Great.

This is not the same Philip who was one of the apostles. This is a different Philip. He was first introduced to us when the first deacons were chosen. He was named immediately after Stephen (Acts 6:5).

Stephen had been the first martyr. But it is Philip who has the distinction of being the first missionary. He had been the vice president of the first board of deacons. We will see him again in Acts 21.

2. The Place of Philip's Preaching; *Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them (8:5).*

Both the Textus Receptus as well as many other of the ancient texts of the Bible omit the definite article. If this is the case, then we ought to read this as "A city of Samaria."

The city of Samaria had long since been destroyed by the Assyrians. There was now another city on that site, but it was no longer called Samaria. The reference here in verse 5 is likely to one of any number of cities within the province of Samaria.

Samaria was the province that lay between Judea and Galilee. It was a beautiful country with rolling hills and fertile meadows, but the Jewish people did not normally go there. It wasn't that it was an ugly place. Rather it was because it was inhabited by Samaritans. The Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans. And the feeling was mutual. When a Jew wanted to travel from Judea to Galilee or back, he would normally make a wide detour around Samaria.

There had been a barrier of hatred and prejudice between the Jews and the Samaritans that went back seven hundred years to the days of the Assyrian Captivity. The Samaritans were a race of half-breeds. They were part Jewish and they were part something else. As such, they were excluded from worship in the Temple. If you were a Gentile, you could always proselyte to Judaism. But a Samaritan was not even permitted to do that.

As Philip travels to Samaria, I want you to realize that he is crossing the barrier of hundreds of years of racial prejudice. There is a principle here. It is that there is no room for prejudice within the people of God. An old black gentleman living in southern Georgia had come to know the Lord and he wanted to worship at a rather

exclusive, upper-class white church, but they wouldn't let him join because he was black. He was heartbroken and he prayed that evening, "Lord, I want so bad to join a church and worship You, but they won't let me in." The Lord answered his prayer and said to him, "Son, I've been trying to get into that church for years and they won't let me in, either." Philip didn't have that problem. There was no prejudice to be found within the pure.

3. The Message of Philip: *Philip... began proclaiming Christ to them (8:5).*

We should read the definite article with the word "Christ." Philip was proclaiming THE Christ. The Samaritans knew about the Christ. They knew that the Greek word "Christ" is the same as the Hebrew word "Messiah." They believed that a Messiah was going to come and that He would teach them all things.

Philip's proclamation went to the very heart of that belief. The message that Philip proclaimed was startling:

"He has come! The Messiah for whom you have been waiting has arrived. He even came to Samaria and spoke to a woman by a well. He was crucified and buried and then he rose again from the dead and today He is alive. By His death, He paid for sins; by His resurrection, He calls us to come to a new life through faith in Him."

4. The Response to Philip's Preaching: *And the multitudes with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip (8:6).*

This was fertile ground. Jesus had already ministered within Samaria. The seed had been planted. Now the season of harvest has arrived. When the harvest begins, it is a great harvest.

We tend to look at this passage and to be impressed with the miracles of healing and the fact that demons were being cast out and that people who had been paralyzed and lame were now square dancing. But I want to suggest to you that it was no less a miracle that the multitudes were of one accord. It is difficult to get a multitude to do anything with one accord.

That brings us to a principle. It is that there is unity among the pure. The people of God are seen to be the people of God by their unity. That doesn't mean we all dress the same or look the same or talk the same. But it does mean that we all follow the same Lord and have the same faith and have participated in the same baptism -- I don't mean the kind with water, but the kind that is on the inside. God wants His people to be ONE and we see in this passage to what lengths He will move to preserve that unity.

The response to Philip's preaching was one of joyful acceptance: *And there was much rejoicing in that city* (8:8). Do you remember what it was like when you first heard the message of the gospel and you came to Christ, trusting in Him as your Lord and Savior? It was a time of rejoicing. I love to get around brand new Christians and to see the Lord through their eyes. Everything is fresh and new and exciting. If you don't know Him, then there is an incredible adventure awaiting you. I urge you to come to Him today.

THE PHONY

*Now there was a certain man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city, and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great; ¹⁰ and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, "This man is what is called the Great Power of God."
¹¹ And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts. (Acts 8:9-11).*

We have seen the pure as it is personified in the person of Philip and we saw that it was good and a reason for rejoicing. But now our focus changes. Be move from the pure to the perverse and the phony. In this case, he was a man named Simon.

Jesus told a parable of the Good Samaritan. This is the story of the Bad Samaritan.

Simon had a racket going. He was a magician and he had the only show in town. More than that, he was a con artist. He had the people of Samaria conned. He was a phony but they did not know that he was a phony. Instead they thought of him as *the Great Power of God*.

This brings us to a principle. It is that phony people do not announce their phoniness. Just the opposite. They always try to pass themselves off as the real thing.

A number of years ago, a man was operating one of those big riding lawnmowers just outside Port Everglades and the blade of the lawnmower happened to hit a plastic bag that had been concealed in some bushes. The bag was full of counterfeit money and suddenly there were twenty dollar bills everywhere. I was working at the Port Fire Station at the time and we rolled up and collected it all to turn it over to the FBI. When we got back to the station, I had a chance to carefully examine one of the false bills. If you didn't look at it too closely, you might not have noticed it was a counterfeit. It had the words "legal tender" on it and a picture of Andrew Jackson. Nowhere on the bill did it admit to being unauthentic. In fact, it seemed to have been made to resemble as close as possible the real thing. It is no accident that Satan is known as an angel of light. He is the master counterfeiter. And he will always

make his lie look as much like the truth as possible.

Simon was a counterfeiter. Notice that we read in two different verses that people were giving attention to him: *and they all, from smallest to greatest, were **giving attention** to him, saying, "This man is what is called the Great Power of God."* ¹¹ *And they were **giving him attention** because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts. (Acts 8:10-11).* This man was used to getting lots of attention. He had grown to like it. I have a feeling that he thrived on it. This brings us to a second principle concerning phony people. It is that phony people like to be noticed.

Most of us tend to be like that. We tend to like it when people pay attention to us. It becomes a sign of our own self-importance. We become like little gods, wanting to be worshiped.

"Come and listen to me and see how important I am."

Have you ever seen a child on a diving board? You will hear the same thing: "Mommy! Daddy! Watch me!" The Scriptures call for us to give attention to the Lord. This is why God instituted the Sabbath. It was to be a day when men stopped their labors and gave their attention to the Lord.

Now I want to ask you a question. What is your reaction when you go unrecognized? When you do that special thing or when you achieve that certain accomplishment and nobody notices, what do you do? Do you get a little resentful? Would you do the good things that you do, even if you know that nobody would ever know about it? If there is any question in your mind, then you need to remember that only the phony need to be noticed.

THE PROFESSION

But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike. ¹³ And even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip; and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed. (Acts 8:12-13).

Simon heard the preaching and he saw the miracles and he was impressed. He decided that this was a good thing. He made a profession of faith in Christ and became a follower. Not only that, but the implication is that once he heard the gospel and made a profession of faith, he stopped practicing magic. From all outward appearances, he seemed to be a true believer. But the reality was that he was a phony.

A man once came into my office with a soda can that he had just purchased from the soft drink machine outside. He can was still unopened and had no holes or marks on it. But when you held it in your hand, you could immediately tell from its weight that it was empty. The label on that can said that it contained soda but inside was only emptiness.

How many people are just like that can? They look like a Christian and they dress like a Christian and they talk the same way Christians talk and they eat Christian cookies and go to places that Christians go, but there is no reality on the inside.

They have the outward label that says they have the Holy Spirit within them. But they are empty inside. It is like the man who stood up in church and prayed, “Fill me with your Spirit, Lord,” And his wife sitting next to him was heard to mutter, “Don’t do it, Lord. He leaks.” Simon had that problem. He looked so good, but there was only emptiness on the inside. And there comes a time when what is on the inside eventually manifests itself on the outside.

THE POWER

Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, 15 who came down and prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Spirit. 16 For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 17 Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit. (Acts 8:14-17).

It wasn’t long before the news of the ministry in Samaria reached the church in Jerusalem. This was a major event. There was a church forming outside the boundaries of the church. Something had to be done. This called for an investigation. It was decided to send in the “heavyweights.”

I think it was especially significant that Peter and John were chosen for this mission. You need to know that Peter’s name really wasn’t Peter. That isn’t what his driver’s license read. His real name was Simon. Peter was only a nickname given to him by Jesus. The nickname meant “rock.” We would have called him Rocky.

It was to “Rocky” that Jesus had said, “Upon this rock I will build my church.” He had given to Peter the keys of the kingdom. That meant that He had given Peter authority within the church to bind and to loose. In this chapter we see Peter exercising that authority. But Peter is not alone. He is not the only one exercising that authority. He is accompanied by John. This was the same John who, with his brother James, had come to Jesus and asked that He rain fire down from heaven and upon the cities of Samaria (Luke 9:53). He had once asked

Jesus to bring about a baptism of fire and instead, he will be instrumental in bringing about a baptism of the Spirit.

In verse 15 we read that Peter and John *came down and prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Spirit*. We know that the Holy Spirit came upon the church at Pentecost. We also know that the Holy Spirit comes upon all believers when they come to Jesus Christ in faith, trusting in Him as their Lord and Savior.

And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" (Galatians 4:6).

However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. (Romans 8:9).

The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God (Romans 8:16).

One of the evidences that you are a Christian is that you have the Holy Spirit living within you. But that wasn't always the case. There was a time when the Holy Spirit came through the ministry of the apostles. Why? It was so that there would be unity within the church.

There was already a division between the Jews and the Samaritans. The Jews had a temple in Jerusalem and the Samaritans had a place of worship on Mount Gerizim. The people were divided. God wants His people to be one.

There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling (Ephesians 4:4).

If that ONE Spirit had not been administered by the apostles to all of the diverse groups, then people might have been tempted to think that there were a lot of different Spirits and a lot of different bodies. You would have had one church of the Jews and another church of the Samaritans and still another church of the Greeks. But God never designed for there to be any more than one church.

There is a lesson here. It is that the gates of racial prejudice will never prevail against the universal results of the cross. The gospel bursts through those gates, bringing men of every race and nation into God's kingdom. This is made manifestly clear to the apostles as they come to Samaria and are used as instruments through whom the Spirit of God comes.

It was as the representatives of the church in Jerusalem came and laid hands upon these Samaritan believers that they received the Spirit of God. Evidently the coming of the Spirit

was accompanied by some type of physical manifestation. Perhaps it was similar to the Pentecost event when people saw the flames of fire and heard men speak with other tongues.

This shouldn't surprise us too much. The coming of the Spirit always brings forth an external manifestation. This doesn't mean you have to see fire or hear the sound of rushing wind or even speak in tongues. But there is still a manifestation. The Spirit is manifested in a changed life and in a new outlook. It is true that God loves you just the way you are, but He also loves you too much to leave you the way you are. When He comes into your life, He brings about a change.

PAYMENT ATTEMPTED

Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, 19 saying, "Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." (Acts 8:18-19).

Simon was impressed when he saw the bestowing of the Spirit. He knew all about illusions and magic tricks. He knew that this was no mere trick. He knew where to look for wires and for mirrors and he had checked and he had found that there weren't any. This was the real thing.

Simon decided that Peter and John had an act that he just had to have. He figured that this must be something that you can turn on and off. Maybe you could attend a class on Holy Spirit Filling 101.

We treat God like that. We want to put God into a test tube with a label that saying, "To use, just add prayer and shake well." But God doesn't work like that. He isn't a mathematical formula. You can't just go to God, press a button marked "prayer," and get whatever you want. He isn't a genie in a lamp. He is the Sovereign Ruler of the universe. You have to treat Him like that.

Notice that Simon doesn't ask to receive the Spirit. He wasn't even interested in whether he had the Spirit or not. Instead he asks for the power to bestow the Spirit upon others. He wants to do this so that people will look at him and say, "Wow! Isn't he wonderful?"

The religious man loves the limelight. He loves to be known as "the great power of God." Religion is all about control; either controlling God or else controlling people. By contrast, the gospel is about losing control and admitting before God that we cannot control Him. To our quest for power and for significance, God says, "What you really need is Me. I am the

answer to your heart's desire.

All too often, we try to find significance in...

- A position.
- A relationship
- Power
- A job or a place of retirement

What we really need is the acceptance of God. It is in Christ that we find the essence of real significance and glory and power.

PRONOUNCEMENT OF CONDEMNATION

But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! ²¹ You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. ²² Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you. ²³ For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity." (Acts 8:20-23).

Peter's rebuke is both biting and sharp. He does not mince words. He gets straight to the point. We can summarize his statement in three points.

1. You do not have the Spirit.
2. You cannot buy the Spirit.
3. You need to repent and ask for forgiveness for attempting to obtain control over the Spirit in the way you did.

All of the money in all of the banks in all of the countries of the world could not buy the gift of eternal life. It is priceless. It is offered to you as a free gift.

The story is told of a missionary to Japan who had shared the gospel with an old fisherman. The fisherman would politely listen, but always refused the offer of the gospel, insisting that his own works would merit his standing before God. The missionary was at the fisherman's house and noticed upon the mantel a beautiful pearl. When asked about it, the fisherman explained that his son had been a pearl diver and that, while obtaining this particular pearl, he had drowned. The missionary said, "This is certainly a wonderful pearl. You must allow me to purchase it." He offered the fisherman five yen. The fisherman refused. "You could

not buy that pearl for five yen or for five million yen. That pearl cost me the life of my son. It is priceless to me.” The missionary quietly replied, “Eternal life is the most precious thing of all. You cannot earn it or deserve it. It is priceless; it cost God the life of His own Son.”

PRAYER REQUESTED

But Simon answered and said, “Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.”

And so, when they had solemnly testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they started back to Jerusalem, and were preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans. (Acts 8:24-25).

Was Simon’s response one of genuine repentance or was it more phoniness? There used to be a commercial that asked, “Is it real or is it Memorex?” We can ask the same question. I’m not really sure of the answer. That isn’t really the issue. The real issue isn’t about Simon. The real issue is about you.

Steve Brown tells the story of a man and his wife who went to the movies, taking with them their little baby. The manager of the theater stopped them at the front lobby and said to them, “I want you to stay and enjoy our movie, but I also have to look out for the rest of our patrons and, if your baby begins to cry during the movie, I will have to ask you to leave. However if that happens, I will refund your money from the tickets.”

They went on in and sat down and soon the movie began. Fifteen minutes into the movie, the wife leaned over to her husband and whispered, “This is the worst movie I have ever seen.” The husband replied, “It certainly is. Pinch the baby.”

There is a sense in which today there is still time to pinch the baby. Perhaps you’ve been coming to church for a while because it gives you the warm fuzzies and you like the music and you enjoy basking in the love that is shared, but when it comes time to committing your life to Jesus, you get uncomfortable. There is still time to pinch the baby. But there is coming a day when there won’t be a baby anymore. There will be a conquering king. Your decision will have already been made.