

Place: Lurgan Baptist 6:3:2007

Reading: Acts 8:1-25

THE CHURCH ABLAZE

16. THE PURE AND THE PHONEY

On Sunday, the 8th January, 1956, on the shore of a lonely river deep in the jungle of Ecuador, five missionaries were murdered by primitive Auca Indians. News of the massacre shocked the world. To some, their deaths seemed a senseless tragedy. Many decried the promising missionary careers cut short, the five young wives bereft of their husbands, the children left fatherless. Those with deeper spiritual insight saw things differently. Nate Saint on the five martyrs, had written,

“As we weigh the future and seek the will of God does it seem right that we should hazard our lives for just a few savages? As we ask ourselves this question, we realise that it is not the call of the needy thousands, rather it is the simple intimation of the prophetic Word that there shall be some from every tribe in His presence in the last day and in our hearts we feel that it is pleasing to Him that we should interest ourselves in making an opening into the Auca prison for Christ.”

Elisabeth Elliot, widow of another of the martyrs, Jim Elliot said this,

“To the world at large this was a sad waste of five young lives. But God has His plan and purpose in all things. There were those whose lives were changed by what happened on Palm Beach. In Brazil a group of Indians at mission station deep in the Mato Grosso, upon hearing the news, dropped to their knees and cried out to God for forgiveness for their own lack of concern for fellow Indians who did not know of Jesus Christ. From Rome an American official wrote to one of the widows, ‘I knew your husband. He was to me the ideal of what a Christian should be.’ An Air Force Major stationed in England, with many hours of jet flying, immediately began making plans to join the Missionary Aviation Fellowship. A missionary in Africa wrote, ‘Our lives will never be the same. We knew two of the men. Their lives have left their mark on ours.’

Off the coast of Italy, an American naval officer was involved in an accident at sea. As he floated alone on a raft, he recalled Jim Elliot's words which he had read in a news report, ‘When it comes to die, make sure that all you have to do is die.’ He prayed that he might be saved, knowing that he had more to do than die. He was not ready. God answered his prayer and he was rescued. In Iowa, an eighteen year old boy prayed for a week in his room, then announced to his parents, ‘I'm turning my life over completely to the Lord. I want to try to take the place of one of those five.’

My at first glance, Stephen's death may also seem pointless. Here was another promising career cut short. He was a powerful, miraculous preacher, with a deep knowledge of the Old Testament. Such was the godly character of his life that he was one of the seven chosen by the church to oversee its daily affairs. Why was it necessary that one so gifted should have a brief ministry ? Still again, his ministry seemed to have ended in failure. For not only was he killed as a heretic, but his death also triggered the first persecution against the entire church. That persecution, spearheaded by Saul of Tarsus, scattered the Jerusalem fellowship. Yet such a distorted view of Stephen's death reveals a lack of understanding of how the Holy Spirit works. You see, this persecution which seemed to be a negative, was in reality a positive factor. For it led to the first great missionary outreach by the early church.

My Satan's attempt to stamp out the church's fire merely scattered the embers and started new fires around the world. In the words of the early church Father Tertullian, the blood of the martyrs became the seed of the church. Now chances are, most of us will never know what it means to be persecuted. The worst kind of persecution we endure is a little mockery at school, a little sarcasm at the office, or a little trouble in the neighbourhood. Yet often, these things just paralyse us for weeks, don't they ? How revealing it would be if such persecution as the early Christians endured suddenly came upon us. That's when we'd move from the realm of theory to reality. At that

moment our faith would either stand or fall because persecution always separates the pure from the phoney, the authentic from the artificial. Always. Now we've reached a turning point in our study of Acts. Look at (1:8) a verse that summaries the entire book. (Ch's 1-7) describe the church established at Jerusalem. In (Ch's 8-12) we see the church scattered to Judea and Samaria. Finally, in (Ch's 13-28) we see the church extended to the remotest part of the earth. For some time the believers had been involved in " *city evangelism*," but (Ch 8) begins a new phase: the church scattered to Judea and Samaria. Jerusalem, which has dominated the story up to this point, begins to settle into the background, illustrating the truth that opportunity Ignored is opportunity Lost. My the church in Jerusalem continues, but the explosive days of apostolic miracles, and tremendous growth fade.

Paul wrote that the gospel came " *to the Jew first*," and then " *to the Greek*." (Rom 1:16) Stephen's murder surely fixed a point of the gospel's final rejection by the Jewish leaders, and God's design for the gospel to move out into new territory began. And the catalyst that pushed the gospel beyond Jerusalem's borders ? Persecution ! For as this chapter opens we notice,

(1) A GREAT HOSTILITY SAUL

Saul, the relentless hunter brought death and misery to the church. Later he recalled the extent of his ravaging, " *I persecuted this way unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women.*" (22:4)

Now the book of Acts and the Epistles give sufficient data for a sketch of Saul's early life.

He was born in Tarsus in Cilicia, a Hellenist Jew (22:3) a “ *Hebrew of the Hebrews,*” (Phil 3:5) the “ *son of a Pharisee,*” (23:6) and a Roman citizen. (16:37 22:25-28) He was educated in Jerusalem by Gamaliel (22:3) and became a devoted Pharisee. (26:4-5 Phil 3:5) Measured by the Law, his life was blameless (Phil 3:6). He was one of the most promising young Pharisees in Jerusalem, well on his way to becoming a great leader for the Jewish faith. (Gal 1:14) And Saul really thought that persecuting the Christians was one way of serving God, so he did it with a clear conscience. (2 Tim 1:3)

(a) THE MENTION OF THIS PERSECUTION:

Is brought before us in (8:1) Now this is the fourth persecution in the book of Acts. Stephen's death was the catalyst for the storm of persecution, led by Saul, that broke on the church. The predictions of the Lord Jesus were coming true, “ *If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you,*” (Jn 15:20) “ *they shall put you out of the synagogues: yea the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service.*” (Jn 16:2) Now the interesting thing about this persecution is this, it seems to have been directed more against the members of the church, than the apostles of the church. It was the Hellenists of which Stephen was one that bore the brunt of this persecution. (11:19-20)

Perhaps the instigators of the persecution, having made a martyr out of Stephen, left the apostles alone lest they make martyrs out of them. Perhaps the apostles still thought of the Jerusalem church as the mother church, and thought they should remain with her no matter what. My did they feel that the post of danger was the post of duty ? Did they remain in the city out of devotion to their Lord, with a desire to shepherd the flock in Jerusalem ? Did they remain behind to continue their evangelistic efforts ? (8:2) Whatever, there was a fierce outbreak of opposition against the Jerusalem church, indeed,

(b) THE MANNER OF THIS PERSECUTION:

Was intense ! Do you see that word “ *havoc,*” in (8:3) ? (Luminomai) It appears only here in the New Testament. It means “ *to destroy, to ruin, or to damage.*” In extra-biblical writings, it was used to describe the destruction of a city, and mangling by a wild beast. Saul literally tore the church apart, an act that would haunt him for the rest of his life so that he felt unworthy to be called an apostle. (22:3-5. 19-20 26:9 1 Cor 15:9) My Saul went mad. He had his hit list. He entered every house where a believer lived. There was hardly a home where his cruelty was not felt. The prisons overflowed. In later years we find Paul, wherever his gospel travels took him, zealously taking up collections for “ *the poor saints which are at Jerusalem.*” (Rom 15:26) My many of them he had made poor. Their faces haunted him. Whenever he met with the Jerusalem church he would see bereaved saints, a husband missing here, a brother, a mother, a

father missing there, the fruits of his furious persecution of the church in his unsaved days.

I tell you Saul of Tarsus was the last person in Jerusalem you would have chosen to be the great apostle to the Gentiles. And yet amidst the horrors of the waves of persecution against Christ's followers, something wonderful took place, the gospel invaded Samaria, for:

(c) *THE MINISTRY OF THIS PERSECUTION:*

Was this, “ *therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the Word.*” (8:4) You see persecution does to the church what wind does to seed, it scatters it and only produces a greater harvest. The word translated “ *scattered,*” (diaspeiro) means “ *to scatter seed.*” The believers in Jerusalem were God's seed and the persecution was used of God to plant them in new soil so that they could bear fruit.

(Matt 13:37-38) Some went throughout Judea and Samaria (1:8) and others went to more distant fields. (11:19) My do you see what happened ? God used that which the devil intended to hinder the church to help the church. You say, “ *nothing good can ever come out of persecution.*” No ! Will here God turned members into missionaries.

And notice that all the scattered believers were involved in evangelism. Now some are especially gifted as evangelists (21:8 Eph 4:11 2 Tim 4:5) but all believers are called to proclaim Christ. My does this not touch upon a serious problem in our churches and

in our lives ? What's the problem ? We're not proclaiming Christ ! We say, “ *Leave that to the preacher, the evangelist, the door to door worker, the soul-winner.*” But the Bible says, “ *Let the redeemed of the Lord say so.*” (Ps 107:2) My are you saying so ? (1)

(2) A GREAT HAPPINESS PHILIP

Look at (8:8) Of course there was. Revival always produces rejoicing. When people get right with God and consequently get right with each other, heaven comes down and glory fills the soul. The firstfruits of the Spirit after all, are love, joy and peace. Turn these things loose in a community and great will be the happiness that follows. As the psalmist said, “ *Happy is that people whose God is the Lord.*” (Ps 144:15) Now why was there joy in the city of Samaria ? Well lets trace the series of events here that resulted in “ *great joy in that city.*”

(a) *LOOK AT THE PERSON:*

“ *Then Philip*,” (8:5) Four characters bearing the name Philip were known to the NT writers.

(1) A son of Herod the Great, whose wife Herodias left him in order to live with his half-brother. (Matt 14:3 Mk 6:17 Lk 3:19)

(2) A son of Herod the Great, by his fifth wife, Cleopatra of Jerusalem. He married Salome, the daughter of Herodias and had no children.

(3) Philip, the apostle who was called to follow Christ

on the day after the call of Simon and Andrew.

(Jn 1:43)

(4) Philip the evangelist who was one of “ *the seven.*” chosen to serve the church in (Acts 6) Now this is the Philip that is mentioned in (8:5) As a Hellenistic Jew, he was not particularly welcome in Jerusalem, and as a Christian he was doubly unwelcome. So when the persecution began he fled to Samaria. Do you recall that Stephen was one of “ the seven also chosen to “ *serve tables,*?” Stephen became the first great *martyr* of the faith. Philip became the first great *missionary* of the faith. Do you know something ? Faithfulness in little things is God's appointed way to bigger things ! (Matt 25:23) Philip was faithful in the task of “ *serving tables,*” and God gave him a wider ministry. He became known as, “ *Philip the evangelist.*” (21:8) My are you faithful in your present task ? Whatever God has called you to do are you doing it to His glory ? “ *Then Philip,*” but read on “ *went down to the city of Samaria.*”

(b) LOOK AT THE PLACE:

Now Samaria was located some forty miles north of Jerusalem. It was the ancient capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, founded by Omri. (1 Kings 16:24) Do you recall that in 722 BC Samaria fell to the Assyrians ? (2 Kings 17:1-6) And what happened was this. Many of its people were resettled in other lands by the Assyrians, who also located people from other nations in that region. (2 Kings 17:24) The resulting mix of Jews and Gentile peoples became known as the Samaritans. Look at (2 Kings 17:33) Now to the Jews

the Samaritans were a mongrel nation of half-breeds. Do you what the Jewish rabbis said ? “ *Let no man eat the bread of the Samaritans for he who eats their bread is as he who eats swines flesh.*” A popular prayer in those days said, “ *and, Lord, do not remember the Samaritans in the resurrection.*”

Now you can be the sure the Samaritans felt the same way about the Jews. There was no love lost between them and that was evident during NT times. Do you remember what the woman of Samaria said to the Lord Jesus ? “ *How is it that Thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria ? for the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans.*” (Jn 4:9) My no self-respecting Jew would go to Samaria. But Christ did. Now Philip did. What about us ? Are we willing to carry the gospel into pioneer territory and dare to challenge ancient prejudices ? “ *Into all the world the gospel to every creature,*” is still God's commission today. But look not only at (a) (b)

(c) LOOK AT THE PREACHING:

Look at (8:5) The word “ *preached,*” means “ *to herald, to proclaim publicly.*” What did Philip proclaim publicly ? Christ ! He preached Christ to the Samaritans. Not Judaism but Christ ! Not religion, but Christ. Not politics but Christ. For true evangelism emphasises the Centrality of Jesus Christ. My is Christ central in your preaching, witnessing, singing, and testifying ? Is Christ central in your life ? Do you talk with Him in prayer ? Do you talk about Him with others ? Does His will for you supercede your own ?

What happened in Samaria ? Well, there was a tremendous response.

(d) LOOK AT THE POWER:

Of God operating in (8:6-7) You see through these miracles God confirmed Philip as His man and Philip's message as His Word. Now remember he was not an apostle. He was not a big shot. He was, in fact, a refugee in a hostile environment. He was not in Samaria by choice, persecution drove him there ! Philip probably would have liked to remain in Jerusalem. But once in Samaria he was so full of love for Christ that he could not stop telling others about Jesus. And before he knew it he had a revival on his hands. (8:8) “ *And there was great joy in that city.*” There was laughter and joy on the streets of Samaria because these people were experiencing the rapture of a relationship with God through Christ.

But my wherever God sows His true believers Satan will eventually sow his counterfeits. (Matt 13:24-30) This was true of the ministry of John the Baptist: (Matt 3:7) the ministry of Christ: (Matt 23:15) and it would be true of Paul's ministry also. (13:6 2 Cor 11:1) The enemy comes as a lion to devour and when that approach fails he comes as a serpent to deceive. Thus we see here,

(3) A GREAT HYPOCRISY SIMON

Look at (8:9) “ *But,*” That spoils the picture. Everywhere there was repentance, revival, rebirth but in the soul of a certain Simon the Sorcerer Satan still

reigned supreme. Now Satan had tried **money** as a means of stopping the church in the case of Ananias and Sapphira. He had tried **murder** as a means in the case of Stephen. Now he was to try **mimicry**. He had a man ready, and he would have this man go through a form of conversion and be put into the church so that he would have one of his men in a position to do mischief. My ... one of the most fearful realities in all of Scripture is that some who think they are saved will be eternally lost. Do you recall the words of Christ ? “ *Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy name ? and in Thy name have cast out devils ? and in Thy name done many wonderful works ? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me ye that work iniquity.*” (Matt 7:22-23)

And to their horror, they will discover too late that there is an entrance to hell at the edge of the very gates of heaven. Where did Simon go wrong ? How did one who came so close miss out on salvation ? Well, notice that this passage reveals four glaring faults in Simon's theology. You see here was someone who had:

(a) A WRONG VIEW OF SELF:

Look at (8: 9-10) Now the early church Fathers reported that Simon was one of the founders of Gnosticism and that he viewed himself as God incarnate. Harold J. Brown in his book Heresies says this, “ *The first two preachers to propagate Gnostic ideas within Christian circles were Simon and his successor Menander. Unlike later and more famous*

representatives of Gnosticism, both Simon and Menander claimed divinity for themselves. According to (Acts 8:9-11) Simon called himself the ‘ great power of God.’ The Greek term he used dunamis, was used by later more orthodox theologians in reference to both the Son and the Holy Spirit Justin Martyr also reports Simon’s messianic claim.” (Mk 14:62)
Now

Philip proclaimed Christ, Simon proclaimed himself.

And the people followed him, saying to themselves, “ *What this man does is supernatural Simon the Great Power of God.*” And Simon loved it ! He was inflated with pride. Do you know something ? A faulty view of man keeps multitudes out of the kingdom. The view that man is essentially good, lulls people into a false sense of security, causing them to think that God applauds their good deeds. Is 64:6) My those who fail to see themselves as sinners will see no need for a Saviour.

(b) A WRONG VIEW OF SALVATION:

Look at (8:12) My Simon was a man of immense power, but Philip’s power was greater. As a result Simon lost his followers. His star was fading fast. What could he do ? Simon got a brilliant idea ! “ *If you can’t beat them, join them.*” Thus we read (8:13) Do you see how Simon viewed salvation ? He merely viewed it as a purely ritualistic, external matter, an additional act in his life instead of the total transformation of his whole person on the inside. My faith that does not transform the life is not saving

faith. Do you recall the words of practical James ? “ *What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works, can that faith save him ?*” (James 2:14) My which kind of faith do you possess ? Saving faith or spurious faith ? Biblical faith or the faith of the demons ? Simon had (a) (b) But he had,

(c) A WRONG VIEW OF THE SPIRIT:

Look at (8:18) He treated the apostles as though they were fellow practitioners of magic, and was ready to negotiate the price to buy the secret of their power. But my nothing God has is for sale, certainly not the Holy Spirit. Indeed, there is nothing sinful men have to offer Him. Salvation and spiritual blessing He pours out freely to His children. (Is 55:1) Yet countless thousands are striving desperately to buy God’s blessing. Here was a man who actually thought he could buy the authority to bestow spiritual power on others.

In church history it is called “ *simony,*” after this very man. W.A. Criswell has written about this,

“ The church became a part of the state at the time of Constantine’s conversion. Simony was already practiced but it increased in the buying of ecclesiastical office and benefits. A bishop’s office could be bought for so much money. The same was true of an archbishop’s office, a cardinal’s hat, an ecclesiastical living in parishes and monasteries. Simony finally gave rise to the Reformation when all over Europe indulgences were sold in order to get

money to build St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome."

Now we would be wrong to suppose that this does not apply to us simply because we have not offered money for spiritual power. Simon tried to obtain spiritual power in order to promote himself, and any time we seek spiritual power or abilities to put forward ourselves we make the same mistake. Preaching to gain recognition or status is simony. Serving with an eye to gain promotion in the local church is simony. Even seeking to be godly so others will think we are godly is a type of simony. Are we guilty?

Now before we close this study, there is an important theological question we need to address here.

It's this. **Why was the gift of the Holy Spirit delayed until the coming of Peter and John ?** (8:17) You see many who teach that Christians receive the Holy Spirit subsequent to salvation appeal to this passage for this support. Here is a clear example, they argue, of people who were saved, yet did not have the Holy Spirit. The question is this, **"Why was the Holy Spirit withheld when they believed ?"** Look at (8:16) Another translation put it like this, *"He had not yet fallen upon any of them."* Now the Greek word for *"not yet,"* signifies *"something that should have happened but has not yet."* In other words this verse is saying that the Samaritans were saved, but for some peculiar reason, what should have happened the Holy Spirits coming had not yet occurred. Why ?

Well, I think we get the clue in (8:14) Philips

evangelistic efforts were with the despised Samaritans. We have already noted the animosity between Jew and Samaritan. Now if these Samaritans had received the Holy Spirit at the moment of salvation, the terrible rift between the Jews and the Samaritans might have continued in the Christian church.

There could well have been two separate churches, a Jewish church and a Samaritan church. But God had designed one church. (Gal 3:28) Do you see now why God withheld the Holy Spirit until Peter and John arrived ? **To preserve the unity of the church.**

The Samaritan movement was now identified with that of Judea. My this passage does not support the doctrine of subsequence. The idea that you receive the Holy Spirit after you are saved. Such teaching ignores the transitional nature of the book of Acts and flies in the face of the plain teaching of Scripture that "if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His." (Rom 8:9) But back to Simon. (a) (b) (c) He had,

(d) A WRONG VIEW OF SIN:

Look at (8:20-24) Peter challenges Simon to have a correct view of his sin one that sees it for what it is and turns from it. Simons only concern however, seems to be, to escape the temporal consequences of his sin. (8:24 2 Cor 7:9-10) Peter said, *"Thy heart is not right in the sight of God."* (8:21) What about our hearts ? My Simon shows us how close a person can come to salvation and still not be saved. Simon heard the gospel: saw the miracles: made a profession of faith, was baptised, and yet he was never born again.

My it's so possible today to have profession without possession, conversion without repentance, religion without the Holy Spirit. There is still today the pure and the phoney. Perhaps its time for self-examination.
(2 Pet 1:10)