

Acts 8

The death of Stephen brought a new era to the church. The first seven chapters concern the Jerusalem church, its beginning, growth, problems, and triumphs. Jesus had commissioned the apostles to go into all the world, but for a long while they had remained in Jerusalem. Stephen's death changed all that. The frustrations, bitterness and resentments of the opponents of Christ were like a flooded lake, piling higher and higher. When Stephen was stoned it was as if a dam had broken. Unleashed against the disciples was all the long restrained fury the unbelievers had felt toward the thriving, expanding community of believers. "And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church which was in Jerusalem" (Acts 8:1).

Leading in that persecution was zealous Saul, who in later life would look back upon this period as a shameful time, regretfully saying, "I was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious" (1 Tim. 1:13). Saul was a man with deep conviction. What he believed to be right, he contended for with all his being. He believed Jesus was an impostor and he determined to stamp it out so "Saul laid waste the church, entering into every house and dragging men and women committed them to prison" (Acts 8:3).

However, Saul's efforts did not produce the results he wished for, rather just the opposite! The church was scattered, but rather than dying, it actually grew all the more, for "they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word" (Acts 8:4). Whenever the Word is preached to good and honest hearts, conversions result. So it was in this persecution! Soon there were congregations of God's people in all the region of Judaea. Whether this was "providential" or not, it WAS what God intended (Acts 1:8).

Among those scattered abroad was Philip, one of the seven. Chapter eight tells of him and his work as an evangelist (this is what he is called in Acts 21:8). Philip preached to the Samaritans which Jesus had forbidden in the "limited commission," but enjoined in the "great commission" (Mt. 10:5; Acts 1:8). Philip worked miracles and captured the attention of the Samaritans. They joyfully received his word and both men and women were baptized (Acts 8:12).

Among those baptized was a sorcerer named Simon, who had been held in high esteem by Samaritans. They called him "the power of God that is

called Great" (Acts 8:10). He deceived the people with his "witchcraft," but he met more than his match in Philip. He watched Philip and was amazed at the signs and wonders he worked (Acts 8:13). There were miracles and there were "pseudo" miracles--not miracles at all, although they seemed to be. Satan is the great deceiver and he is set to deceive the whole world. He empowers his servants to work lying wonders (2 Thess. 2:8). Since the purpose of miracles is to confirm a spoken message, true miracles do not confirm a false one, therefore works done which pretend to be miracles to confirm false doctrines are just that, pretensions (Mk. 16:19-20).

Philip, as Stephen, could work miracles; the first besides the twelve who could do so. Nevertheless, neither could pass on to others the power to work miracles. That power belonged exclusively to the apostles (Acts 8:18; 19:6; Rm. 1:11; 2 Tim. 1:6).

Simon's old self sprang to life when he saw Peter and John lay hands on others and impart to them spiritual gifts. He offered Peter money to receive such power. Peter rebuked him saying, "Thy silver perish with thee, because thou hast thought to obtain the gift of God with money. Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter; for thy heart is not right before God. Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray the Lord, if perhaps the thought of thine heart shall be forgiven thee. For I see that thou art in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity" (Acts 8:20-23). Simon was terrified and asked Peter to pray for him that none of the things which he had spoken come upon him. Simon is an example that a saved person can so sin so as to be lost, contrary to the popular doctrine "once saved, always saved". His lapse into his old ways brought him into a state of perishing and in the "gall of bitterness and bond of iniquity". It is hard to argue against a demonstration. Since obviously Simon was lost when Peter rebuked him, the only recourse Calvinists have is to deny he had ever been saved. However, the account shows just as clearly that he had been, for Simon believed and was baptized, thus saved according to the promise of Jesus (Mk. 16:16). Just as the "miracles" Simon wrought originated with Satan; so the doctrine "once saved, always saved" came from him, as well.

The Holy Spirit had more work for Philip. An angel directed him to "arise, and go toward the south unto the way that goeth down from Judaea unto Gaza the same is desert" (Acts 8:26). There he met an Ethiopian Eunuch who was the treasurer of Queen Candace and who had been to Jerusalem to worship. He was reading from the prophet Isaiah (53) and when the Spirit directed Philip to "go near and join thyself to this chariot,"

Philip asked him, "Understandest thou what thou readest?" (Acts 8:29-31). Philip preached Jesus to the Eunuch and as they went their way came to a certain water and the Eunuch asked, "Here is water, what doth hinder me to be baptized?" (Acts 8:26). Notice that Philip preached Christ to the Samaritans; Jesus to the Eunuch, obviously the same message (Acts 8:5, 35). This message included preaching about Jesus' Sonship, his death and resurrection, his authority, baptism and the kingdom or church (Acts 8:12; 36-37). If preaching Christ involved those things then, it involves those things now!

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