

Engaging the Real World

(Series: Reimagining Church; Message Eighteen)

Acts 8:1-24

Review (Slide)

January 24, 2021

August – focused on prayer and waiting...

September – focused on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit...

October – focused on the early church's Rule of Life: teaching, fellowship, breaking bread and prayer

November – focused on the Church's mission

This month – focusing on Spirit-empowered leadership

Scripture:

"And Saul approved of their killing him [Stephen].

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. ²Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. ³But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

⁴Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. ⁵Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. ⁶When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. ⁷For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. ⁸So there was great joy in that city.

⁹Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, ¹⁰and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, "This man is rightly called the Great Power of God." ¹¹They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his sorcery. ¹²But when they believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. ¹³Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.

¹⁴When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria. ¹⁵When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit, ¹⁶because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money ¹⁹and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

²⁰Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! ²¹You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. ²²Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. ²³For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin."

²⁴Then Simon answered, "Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me."

²⁵After they had further proclaimed the word of the Lord and testified about Jesus, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the Gospel in many Samaritan villages.

Message:

In my dream, I found myself conversing with a small group of people in heaven.

The man on my left said he had been in heaven about two thousand years - not that he was keeping track. As a Christian in the early Church of Rome, he had been arrested for being a "Follower of the Way" under Nero's persecution, covered with pitch, fastened to a stake and set on fire to light up one of Nero's garden parties.

"How awful!" I said. "No," he said, "I was honored to do that for Jesus; after all he was willing to be crucified for me."

The person on my right said, "I've only been here a couple of hundred years. I came from the island of Erromanga in the South Seas. John Williams, the missionary, came to the island and told us about Jesus. I learned to love Jesus. But it wasn't long before some of my countrymen captured Williams and killed him. For betraying my country's gods, they bound me, cooked me, and ate me.

"How horrible!" I said. "No," he said, "I was glad to die for Jesus. He was beaten, scourged, and crowned with thorns for me."

The person facing me said, "I've only been here a couple of months. I was pastoring a church in Changbai, China because my country, North Korea, had a kidnap order out on me. One afternoon as I was coming out of church, I was stabbed in the stomach and beaten with an axe. I left behind my wife and two young children."

"Wow," I said, "I can't imagine." "It's okay," he said. "I knew this could happen to me when I became a Christian; I'd committed to do whatever Jesus asked. He didn't ask me to do anything he hadn't already done."

And then they looked at me and asked, "*How did you give your life for Jesus?*"

2019 was the worst yet for Christian Persecution since records have been kept. Christian Solidarity International says in the past decade over a million Christians have been martyred; more than **150,000** last year alone.

Hundreds of thousands are currently imprisoned - including over **70,000** in North Korea (The #1 nation on the Persecution Watch List kept by *Open Door Ministries*).

Even in the US, persecution against Christians has intensified - accusations of hate mongering, loss of livelihood for exercising their faith, imprisonment and even murder.

One of the Scripture passages that continues to haunt me is 1 Timothy 3:12 - "*Fact is, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*" I've often made excuses to exempt myself, but Paul says, "*Because of the World we live in, this will involve everyone who follows Jesus – everyone.*" There is no asterisk, footnote or exception clause to this verse from the infallible Word of God. Everyone!

In **Acts 8**, the church begins reaching into the world and the persecution grows. It's a hard story; it involves opposition, suffering, and even death. But it's the story of how God uses people like us to build his church

STEPHEN (8:1-5)

The horrific death of Stephen we talked about last Sunday opened the door to even more intense persecution of the early church.

It compelled many Christ-followers, primarily those of Hellenistic heritage, to **scatter** and seek safety throughout the world taking the Gospel with them...

But the disciples and many Judean believers **stayed** and **stood firm**.

--To stand firm in the midst of persecution requires **commitment** - you need to be fully devoted, *all in*, sold out - if you're not, it will be very easy to bail when it gets even a bit uncomfortable.

--To stand firm requires **courage** - Christ-followers understand following Jesus means serving, sacrifice, and suffering; the Spirit gives strength

--To stand firm requires **character** - it takes integrity to stand for the Truth, to do what we say we'll do; to stay faithful when life gets hard

Meanwhile Saul, encouraged by Jewish religious leaders, made havoc with the early church - brutally, cruelly, and sadistically persecuting those who proclaimed "*Jesus is Lord.*"

God used this persecution to accomplish two significant things in his Church. He forced his church **out** of **Jerusalem**; out of its **comfort zone**; out of the safety of familiarity, numbers, and traditions (This is continual challenge for the church – especially the North American Church; God continually prods his Church to step out of their comfort zone on his mission into the dark world).

And second, God forced his followers to depend on the **gifts** the **Spirit** that he had distributed to each of them instead of just depending on the Apostles (We should never look to or depend solely on a pastor or a even a church for our spiritual growth - but to grow by exercising our faith being a disciple and discipling others).

These verses focus on the persecution; but don't overlook the resolve of the early church... In spite of the persecution, they persevere; they face suffering and death and still they press on; the theory and principle of "*taking up one's cross*" has suddenly become real

in their life. Philip, a recently appointed table-server, goes to preach Christ in Samaria (8:5)

SAMARIA (8:5-8)

Here we see the Church moving into God's **mission** – i.e., embracing her **calling/destiny/task** - “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (f. Acts 1:8).

Philip is the first to leave the comfort of home (i.e., Judea, fellow Jews) and venture into Samaria; Philip becomes the first recorded missionary of the Church.

The Samaritans were considered **Gentiles** but had **Jewish** blood running through their veins. They claimed to be descendants of the Patriarchs (**John 4:12**) and to follow the Torah meticulously, but the Judeans shunned them and banished them from Temple worship (**John 4:9**)

Samaria occupied the territory originally settled by the ten tribes of Israel; in 721 BC they had been conquered and most of them had been taken to Assyria; Medes and Persians moved in and intermarried.

By contrast, when Babylon captured Jerusalem and brought Judah into captivity, they were able to maintain their identity. When they returned in the 5th century B.C., the Samaritans offered to assist - they were refused because they had intermarried. Over the next five centuries, the feuding had only intensified.

In spite of this animosity, Philip goes to Samaria; he confronts the prejudices and injustices and preaches the gospel of Jesus to the Samaritans; he initiates reconciliation.

And “**All the Samaritans paid close attention to what he said**” (i.e., **they listened!**)

This is clearly a move of and testimony to **God's Spirit**. All the signs are there..

--First, the **Truth** of God is proclaimed - “*He proclaimed Christ there...*” They're hearing about Jesus; the story resonates; Philip speaks with authority testifying to what he's seen (not just quoting other teachers like the rabbi's did). He brings a message of Gospel: grace, forgiveness, reconciliation, and hope.

--Second, the **Power** of the Gospel is evident. The Gospel (always) brings change (transformation). Here we see miracles, demonic spirits released, paralytics and cripples healed. Only the Spirit can perform miracles; only the Spirit can bring reconciliation. There is no limit to the reconciling grace of God through Christ who conquers not only the sins of individuals but also of nations and people groups.

--Third, the **Joy** of Jesus is embraced: “*There was great joy in the city*” (8:8). The spiritual poverty, emotional loneliness, and the physical discouragement give way to the endless and bottomless joy in the presence of the Gospel! The Good News is received as Good News! Life is transformed

These three marks **always** accompany the **presence** of the Holy Spirit.

The Church is on mission. Stephen and Philip - two table serving leaders - are **leading** and **transforming** the early church by simply **talking** about Jesus. Church leadership - from table servers to Apostles, from nursery workers to elders - is primarily about talking about Jesus, about transforming lives, about building His Kingdom. And these early leaders are modeling it for the entire church from the first century until Jesus returns.

They're not focused on human power, authority, influence, control, or leverage; they're not knee deep in budgets, policies and procedures, and worship style. They are "talking about Jesus."

They're keeping the main thing the main thing: they're focused on the mission, using their spiritual gifts, and transforming lives for Jesus. At the same time, by being obedience, they are both stepping into the fire - Stephen into the Temple; Philip into Samaria. One is martyred forcing people to scatter; the other is on mission (i.e., a missionary) to transform a nation. That is a big vision. And it underscores the way God works to bring in his kingdom - through his disciples.

Then, having discerned God's Spirit at work, Peter and John went to Samaria, to **embrace** them as Christ-followers and to **pray** that they might be filled with the Holy Spirit. (8:15)

Like they prayed in the Upper Room for the Spirit come, Peter and John now pray for the Holy Spirit to come in Samaria. The Church needs the Spirit for its marching orders; the Church needs its leaders to pray for the empowering and leading of God's Spirit.

And again, in answer to the prayers of the early church leaders, the Spirit comes; and again, amazing things happen. (Sadly, church leaders - including pastors - pray an average of only seven minutes a day, only to minutes more than the average parishioner; and we wonder why the church is losing its influence and its members)

This is Church at its best - believers engaged in the mission of God - "*making disciples of all nations* (including Samaria) *baptizing them* (like Philip) *and teaching them to obey everything Jesus commands* (like Philip, Peter and John did).

The Samaritans were the next step - the natural transition from Jewish mission to Gentile mission to going into all the world (from prayer to action). It is simply what Spirit-empowered leaders and believers do; and God blesses faithful believers

SIMON (8:9-13, 18-24)

There was a man named Simon in the crowd when Philip preached. He was a sorcerer by trade who amazed people with his "magic." (The ancient world was filled with astrologers, soothsayers, and magicians who had considerable influence and made a very comfortable living. They were not necessarily charlatans or imposters; they not only believed in what they did; they actually tapped into the power of the demonic world.)

Simon was a **self-proclaimed** "great man" who had done some amazing things and had a large following who is now suddenly being "out amazed" by **Philip**. He himself was so "astonished" by their signs and miracles that he wanted what they had and so he

converted: “Believed and was baptized” Luke writes (8:13a). (“If you can’t beat them, join them,” fit in, go along until the opening comes...)

And just like you can identify real Christians (those who spend time in the Word and in prayer; those who intentionally seek to discern and obey God’s Will); **you can tell the counterfeit ones.**

Counterfeit Christianity rests on counterfeit **Truth**; counterfeit truth focuses its attention on self/ individual; it’s my way or the highway; Christianity focuses on community on Christ our head and the Church as his body; the early church puts very, very little emphasis or focus on individuals.

2 Corinthians 4:5 - “We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.”

False, counterfeit Christianity says, “It’s me and Jesus” (in that order); but if the focus is on me, it’s not on Jesus.

Counterfeit Christianity rests on a counterfeit **power** (8:11). The amazing “magic” power here can easily resemble the power of God’s Spirit. Moses turned his staff into a serpent; then turned the serpent back onto a staff. Pharaohs’ magicians, you may remember, then did the same thing - from a totally different source.

Simon isn’t really interested in power to share the Gospel, proclaim Jesus, or follow the Spirit in obedience; he’s primarily interested in getting his way and what he’s going to get out of it for himself; he thinks he can buy his way in, schmooze his way in - but it only comes through obedience

Counterfeit Christianity rests on offering counterfeit **joy** (i.e., it doesn’t last) (8:13). Even though he was baptized, it soon became apparent Simon’s head may be in it (“if he could just control the power of the Spirit business would be good”) but his heart wasn’t - “You have no part or share in this ministry because your heart is not right before God” (8:21) - persecution (suffering, being pushed out of our comfort zone) exposes our heart; and then, everyone will know.

You can tell real believers from phonies; real believers are following Jesus into ministry, mission and the world’s messes - regardless of the cost.

Simon is called to repent - get his heart right with God (8:22); Simon asks Peter to pray so nothing “bad” happens (8:23); but no one knows if Simon repented.

SEMANTICS

There is a word here we have encountered before - “*homothumadon*.” It is one of those hard to translate words like “amen,” “hallelujah,” or “hosanna” - because the word occurs only in a Biblical context.

Luke uses it twelve times; Paul just once. We find it first in **Acts 1:24** when the disciples were in the Upper Room praying. In **Acts 2:46** and **4:24** we read, “they were

homothumadon and praying.” Then in **Acts 5:12**, “all the believers were *homothumadon* on Solomon’s porch and people were bringing their sick to be healed.”

In this passage, when Philip goes to Samaria on a preaching mission - “*The crowds listened eagerly ‘homothumadon’ to what he said...*” (**8:6**). It will occur again in **15:25** and in **Romans 15:6** where Paul writes: “*so that you may ‘homothumadon’ glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” The community of Jesus was trying to learn how to follow Jesus in a dark and violent world without becoming dark and violent and without being intimidated or silenced.

***Homothumadon* is a powerful compound word we translate to sound quite tame: “in one accord,” “of one mind,” “all together,” “as one...”** But if we break up the word - “homo” means “the same;” “don” (at the end) means the word is an adverb; and “thumas” is the emotion of strong passion/anger and it’s the part hard to translate.

It’s actually understood to be an intense fiery word, surging with energy - like flying off the handle, losing your temper, or lashing out - only this word has been “redeemed.” There is no place for such things in the resurrection community so the word takes on a whole new character - no negativity, no violence, no meanness.

There is something burning within the followers of Jesus, something drawing them together in the same mind and spirit, something with the passion and intensity of anger, like the passion of the Zealots of Jesus day - but without the violence. Like those in room celebrating the birth of a new baby after years of infertility; or rooting for your team when everyone says they don’t have a chance. This is about God’s mission together - the Spirit did it in Jesus; now he does it in us!

Being in “*one accord*” is not just **acquiescing** to something so we can avoid conflict or decide and all go home; it is a passionate, consensual, **unanimous response** to something God is doing. It’s always about what God has done, is doing, or is about to do. It’s not conflict resolution or arbitration or mediation; it is burning consuming fire! It marks the church being formed by the Spirit (remember the symbol of the tongues of fire!)

This one word defines and unites the Church following the resurrected Jesus together with a compelling faith to go wherever God leads together - willing to lay down their life for it - that’s *homothumadon*.

Homothumadon is not just whipping up enthusiasm for Jesus. It’s not trying to coerce people into **consensus**. It’s not promoting our self-interests (like Simon) into a workable and agreeable plan.

Behind *homothumadon* is a resurrected Jesus and a Spirit-led Church that continues to do what Jesus came to do - **build his kingdom** - in us, in our community, and in our world.

Behind *homothumadon* is an **all-in**, sold-out commitment from leaders to the resurrected Jesus, to keeping our eyes fixed on him, to patiently waiting on the slow work of God, to refusing to be distracted by seemingly more riveting events, personal agendas, or outside pressure.

Homothumadon is what emboldens **Stephen** to lay down his life for Jesus. It is what propels **Philip** to cross the border into Samaria. It is what compels spirit-empowered leaders to counter-culturally **live** and **lead** for Jesus today.

When we get to heaven and someone asks, “*How did you live/give your life for Jesus?*” may we all have a **God-honoring answer**.

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