# Philip in Samaria, Acts 8

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I have in mind to continue my studies in the Scripture using places as a launch point for our Bible Study. I thought I would use the places mentioned in Acts starting with the point where the church began scattering from Jerusalem in Acts 8.

*(8:1) And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. 2 Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. 3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison. 4 Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went*.



The line of blood had been crossed. Now the attacks against the fledgling church were called a “great persecution,” an attack from the outside. The church scattered. Ironically, the leaders stayed in Jerusalem. I am not sure why it happened in this way since it seems almost the opposite of what I would have expected. Fortunately, the people just didn’t run. They moved out preaching the Gospel wherever they went. They had success which would lead to the first attack from within the church in the person of Simon whom we will consider shortly. But first consider Philip.

**Philip went to Samaria.** *5 Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. 6 When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. 7 With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. 8 So there was great joy in that city. 9 Now 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, 10 and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, "This man is the divine power known as the Great Power."*  *11 They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic. 12 But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. 13 Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw*.

We do not know precisely to what city Philip went. Musa Abed and the local Christians in Jifna think it was their own hometown of Jifna. Maybe so. The pictures on the screen show the current map and a couple pictures of the area of Jifna as well as the ancient church there.

We do know what Philip did there. Verse 5 tells us he proclaimed Christ and (v6) did miraculous signs. As a result, the people paid close attention to Philip and in verse 12 “they believed” Philip as he preached the good news. In response to their acceptance of Christ “they were baptized” (v12). Verse 14 says they accepted the Word of God. They heard the preaching of Christ, believed, accepted the Word of God and were baptized. This is quite clearly a revival of the first order.

This passage is the only place where demons shriek when being cast out. One may wonder why evil spirits possessed so many people. In that day virtually every person worshipped a demon idol. The gods of Greece and Rome were not mythological. They were demons. In addition, many had ritual sex with prostitutes associated with the religion. Given such a situation, the miracle is that not everyone was possessed.

Simon the “magician” apparently used occult powers to captivate the people. He had done so for some time and had gained quite a following. He was impressed that Philip also had tremendous powers. He heard the message and accepted Christ as his Savior. Some demonic door was apparently left open in his life because he would eventually go backward in his faith.

**Receiving the Holy Spirit in Samaria.** *14 When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. 15 When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, 16 because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. 17 Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. 18 When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money 19 and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." 20 Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! 21 You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. 22 Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. 23 For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin." 24 Then Simon answered, "Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me." 25 When they had testified and proclaimed the word of the Lord, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages*.

For some, the troubling part of Luke’s account is that the believers received the Holy Spirit so long after salvation.

The Pentecostal explanation of the situation is that they received the Holy Spirit in salvation, but had not yet received the Baptism with the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, these early Christians believed that only the Baptism with the Holy Spirit completed the process and any partial experience was inadequate. They had not yet received the Holy Spirit, that is, completely and fully received the Holy Spirit.

Can we deny that these Samaritans were saved? They believed Philip as he preached the good news of God and Jesus Christ. They were baptized. Then Luke notes that they accepted the Word of God. They met the fundamental requirement for salvation: “*Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved*.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Cyprian’s Council said yes, they were indeed saved. The Constitutions of the Holy Apostles also follows this line saying, “They embraced the faith of the God of the universe, and of the Lord Jesus, and were baptized into His name.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Catholic theology developed the idea of “confirmation” based, in part, on the dynamics of this account. They could not deny that the Samaritans were saved. But if the Catholic theologians accepted the Samaritans as saved, then they must explain away the phrase: *“Then Peter and John placed their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.”*

In Catholic theology, the Baptism with the Holy Spirit is received as part of the salvation-water baptism event. So Catholic theology, along with Anglicans and others who follow them, is caught on the horns of a dilemma. Was the Holy Spirit received in Salvation or when the Apostles laid their hands on them? Rather than accept the views of Cyril or accept the Pentecostal views, the Catholics developed the notion of “confirmation.” In their view, the Holy Spirit was received earlier, when the Samaritans believed and were baptized. The Spirit was only “confirmed” in their lives when the proper authorities laid hands on them. They were comfortable in this view because their own practice often delayed baptism and the imposition of hands some time beyond when the catechumen entered the church’s influence.

It is not clear to me when the church developed the idea of “confirmation”. Possibly it was with Hippolytus of Rome in the third century. What is quite clear is that Cyril, in the middle of the fourth century, is more in tune with a two-step process than he was with Baptism with the Holy Spirit occurring at salvation and a mere “confirmation” occurring later.

In this next section I am using material developed for my book, Modern Pentecostal Controversies where I argued that the book of Acts could be used in the development of theology. As part of that I wanted to show how Acts 8 was used in the second century to resolve baptismal controversies and establish theology.

In the second century, it was questioned whether people baptized by heretics would have to be re-baptized. Those who felt the baptism of heretics was sufficient argued that because the Samaritans were not re-baptized after Peter and John came to them, then it was not necessary to re-baptize those who had been baptized by heretics. The council rejected the argument, not because it was from a historical narrative, and was outside the intent of the author, but because the facts of the case were not an appropriate ground for the conclusion they sought. The council said, “*They who had believed in Samaria had believed with a true faith; and within, in the Church, which is one, and to which alone it is granted to bestow the grace of baptism and to remit sins, had been baptized by Philip the deacon, whom the same apostles had sent. And therefore, because they had obtained a legitimate and ecclesiastical baptism, there was no need that they should be baptized any more, but only that which was needed was performed by Peter and John; viz., that prayer being made for them, and hands being imposed, the Holy Spirit should be invoked and poured out upon them, which now too is done among us, so that they who are baptized in the Church are brought to the prelates of the Church, and by our prayers and by the imposition of hands obtain the Holy Spirit, and are perfected with the Lord’s sea*l.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Cyprian and the council of priests agree that they were saved, even though they had not received the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands. As such, this early council is consistent with how the Assemblies of God views salvation and the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

I am highlighting these elements because some today deny that Acts should be used for theological purposes. For the early church, Acts 8 is pressed into service exactly for theological questions. They based their theology on it. Although it is a historical narrative, and supposedly was outside the author’s intent to establish a pattern, yet the Council was willing to make one incident into a doctrine. The history in Acts was deeply imbedded in the foundation of their doctrine.

One other side topic raised by this passage is that of Simon and his reversion back into the occult. Simon the magician has left a permanent mark on the history of the church. Besides this passage in the Bible, he has given his name to “simony”, the practice of buying and selling church offices. This practice was common in the Middle Ages. Peter’s strong denunciation of Simon indicates that he was responding to more than an innocent request. Neither Pastors nor other spiritual leaders are offended by honest questions. Simon, however, had a heart full of bitterness and was continuing to live in sin. Had he broken with his sin, there would have been no problem, even with an absurd question. Because of the sin, he is here condemned. Simon’s request at the end would seem to leave the matter hanging. However, according to other accounts in church history, Simon became a great antagonist of the church and was influential in introducing elements of Gnostic Christianity.

As I write this for my Wednesday night class, the world is still searching for a motive for the Las Vegas killer, the largest mass murderer in recent US history. I recently called a friend with connections in the FBI to encourage them to investigate whether his motivation was primarily demonic. First I heard that he was frequently seen in the company of prostitutes. The possibility of picking up demons while having relations with prostitutes is very high. The killer’s girlfriend reported that he would sometimes scream at night, “God save me.” That makes me wonder if the demons were already encouraging him to do his horrific act and he was fighting against their influence. I have known people who were moving in and out of demonic control and influence we could no longer control the demonic impulses and I wonder if that was not the case of the Las Vegas killer. Of course, the violence itself has the fingerprints of demons all over it. Demons want to destroy as many people as possible and take great delight in finding someone to do their evil bidding. Clearly the Las Vegas killer wanted to kill as many people as possible. It would be interesting to know what the investigation has revealed giving other clues that demonic control was an issue. I hope the FBI uses competent investigators to assess the clues which my friend could provide.

**Philip and the Ethiopian** also had a very important encounter. “*26 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road-- the desert road-- that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." 27 So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, 28 and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. 29 The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." 30 Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. 31 "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. 32 The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. 33 In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth." 34 The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" 35 Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. 36 As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" 38 And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. 39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. 40 Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.*

The Holy Spirit directed Philip to the governmental official from Ethiopia who was reading Isaiah.[[4]](#footnote-4) The Ethiopian’s question opened the door for Philip to tell him about Jesus. Already the man was a seeker of God. In that case, it was not difficult for him to accept the message about Jesus. It is a case of those who seek God find him. We could also say that those who want to do right will find that God will reach to them to satisfy their desire.

It is also apparent that part of Philip’s message about salvation included the necessity of baptism. So, having opened his heart to the Lord, he asked the next obvious question in verse 36, *"Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?"*  Both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water. After baptism, he came back up out of the water only to have Philip suddenly “spirited away” by the Lord.

The language here is quite similar to the language of the baptism of Jesus followed by his anointing for ministry. Not surprisingly some of the ancient copies also have the words “*And, when they were come up out of the water, the Holy Spirit fell upon the eunuch*.”

Philip disappears only to reappear in Azotus, or Ashdod as we know it today. He preached in that area until he arrived in Caesarea where he probably met Mrs. Philip.

1. Mark 16:16. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Constitutions of the Holy Apostles, Book VI, section VII. Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 7, p. 452. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cyprian. “The Epistles of Cyprian.” Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 5, p. 381. Cyprian lived from about 208 to 258 AD. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Isa 53:6-8 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. 7 He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)