

Title: Intent
Text: Acts 8:1-25
Theme: Using the gospel
Series: Acts
Prop Stmtnt: Using the gospel is abusing the gospel

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “Don’t try to make the Bible relevant. Its relevance is axiomatic. Do not defend God’s word, but testify to it. Trust to the Word. It is a ship loaded to the very limits of its capacity.” That is so clear in this text. May the Lord give our hearts ears to hear what the Spirit says to his church.

Read Text:

Have you ever considered the benefits of having children? I read an article¹ recently that listed some of them beginning with the surprising fact that having children will likely lower your blood pressure. Researchers at a major university discovered that couples with children had significantly lower blood pressure than those who didn’t. Children entitle you to major tax savings. Children get you better parking places in lots that have spaces reserved for families and women who are expecting, plus you get to drive in the HOV lanes. Children help you be more mentally stable. Children renew your thirst for knowledge. Children increase your self-esteem. Children remind you to stop and smell the roses. Children make you happier. All of these were in that article.

So, let’s say that you took this article seriously and decided that one or more of these benefits was really worth having children for. And when your girl turned 10, you sat her down and told her the story of her life in which you said, “Sophia, I tried everything you can think of in order to get a handle on my blood pressure. Nothing seemed to help and I did not want to increase the meds that I was taking. I changed my diet. I exercised more. I lost some weight. I tried to get more sleep. Nothing worked. So, when I read that having children may lower your blood pressure, your mom and I thought, why not? What have we got to lose? We’ve tried everything else. Now, I don’t know whether it’s because you got us a tax break, or we were able to get parking places or drive in the HOV lanes, or the fact that we had to slow down a little bit to make sure we were home for your nap times, but you’ve been worth it. My blood pressure has been lower by an average of 15 points for the last 10 years and I am really happy about that. Sophia, happy birthday – you’ve made a difference in your daddy’s life.

Does Sophia feel treasured, loved, valued, cherished and protected? Of course not! She is a means to an end. Her daddy doesn’t love her for her, he “loves” her for what she does for him. She isn’t the goal of his affection, he is the goal of his affection and she exists to help him achieve his goal of loving himself.

In this text Simon the Magician is attracted to the benefits of the gospel. He wants to “follow Jesus” because Jesus will give him power that he can use to amaze people. He sees that power and he is amazed by it and so, he wants people to think he is amazing. He wants this power and

¹ From Ryan Murphy, Askmen.com, initially published in August of 2011, updated January 11, 2016.

Jesus is his ticket to get this power and Peter says, that's not the gospel. But let's back up. The gospel is not primarily what it will do for you. If you follow Jesus, plan on paying a price.

I. **Persecution is a big part of our story.** (1-3)

If you grew up in Poland in the 40's-60's you know that your people suffered horrendously at the hands of the Nazi's and Communists. Suffering is a big part of your story. If you grew up in Ukraine during the Stalin years you know that millions of your people were starved to death. Famine is a big part of your story. If you are an African American, you know that slavery and racism is a big part of your story. As a follower of Christ, persecution has been, is and will continue to be a big part of our story. This is not the fine print. This is the bold font.

A. **Persecution is evil and hard.** (1,3)

The young man who was watching the cloaks of the men who stoned Stephen approved of what they did and helps lead a movement designed to destroy Christianity by destroying the Christians. V. 3 says that "Saul was ravaging the church." He did this by going to their homes and dragging of men and women and had them committed to prison. The terror and trauma was awful. They would never forget. There is a cost to following Jesus.

B. **Persecution is on a leash and accomplishes God's purpose.** (1b)

What man meant for evil, God overrules for good. This is a major theme of God's plan and ultimately for Christianity. Throw Joseph into prison and God will put him on a throne. Drown our babies in the Nile river, and God will drown your army in the Red Sea. Kill our Savior on a cross and God will use that to secure our pardon and then raise him back to life. Run our people out of the city, and they will spread the gospel where ever they go. But persecution is still evil and hard, but it is not a waste. It is not meaningless.

C. **Persecution reveals genuine faith.** (2)

The devout men who retrieved the body of Stephen and gave him a Christian funeral, were more than pious men, they were men willing to be persecuted for their commitment to Christ and to the people of Christ. Luke does not say, but it is entirely possible that Saul's terror began by going to the homes of the men who identified themselves as believers because of their willingness to care for Stephen's body. Following Jesus was not working out too well for them was it. But they didn't follow Jesus because it was working out, they followed him because HE is worthy. He is glorious. He is King.

II. **God's plan will be accomplished.** (4-8)

Some have assumed that the early church wanted to stay cozy and all-Jewish in Jerusalem and was refusing to go to Judea, Samaria and the uttermost part of the world, so God had to turn up the heat of persecution in order to force them into obeying the great commission. I do not think that this the case. The early church started with one dozen leaders and quickly grew into the thousands. There was an overwhelming amount of work that had to be done and they were doing

it. Jerusalem had not become heaven on earth for the early church. But, the other thing to keep in mind, is that the book of Acts does not tell us everything that happened. Luke is tracing the story line of how the gospel went from Jerusalem to Rome in one generation and influenced almost every metropolis in between.

From this point on, Jerusalem starts to fade a bit. Beginning with chapter 8 Luke records 5 accounts that tell us how the gospel begins to reach Gentiles. This is really helpful for us to understand. Today, we think of Christianity as being distinct from Judaism, which it is. But, in the beginning, Christianity was viewed as a Jewish religion because almost all of the early believers were Jews. It was the Jews who brought the gospel to the Gentiles. Philip goes to the Samaritans and to the high-ranking official from Ethiopia. Saul is converted and launches a church-planting ministry to Gentiles. Peter is sent to a Gentile officer in the Roman army who becomes a believer. Antioch, a Roman city becomes a launching pad for global missions and finally, the attempt to kill Peter by Herod, forces Peter to leave Jerusalem.

Now, this is going to create all sorts of situations where the message of the gospel, the nature of the church and the reality of races is going to go into the big pot on the stove. So, here is where we are going. At the end of chapter 7, the focus is on Jerusalem and the church looks very Jewish. At the beginning of chapter 13, the focus is on Antioch. The church looks like the United Nations and is serving bacon at the church picnic. Beginning here in v.4 we see why and how.

A. Different people, same Jesus. (4-5)

Luke starts talking about Philip as if we already know who Philip is. Well, we should. Go back to 6.5. Stephen was listed first and then Philip. These were the men who were designated by the congregation in Jerusalem to oversee the distribution of food for the widows in the congregation. Stephen was executed at the end of chapter 7, and the story picks up with the next guy on the list, Philip. But, Philip is not in Jerusalem anymore. He, along with many of the other believers have to get out of the city because it was too dangerous for them to stay. Obviously, some stayed in Jerusalem. The apostles stayed, perhaps in hiding to a degree, but Philip and many others left and they went into the region of Samaria.

Now, think with me. Why would they go there? It wasn't very far from Jerusalem. The region of Samaria, as many of you know was populated with people who were blended ethnically and racially and who were really messed up religiously. When the Northern Kingdom fell to the Assyrians in 722 B.C. many of the Israelites were deported and scattered. Other peoples conquered by the Assyrians were brought in by force and made to live in this area known as Samaria. Over time many of them intermarried. The Samaritans were ethnically "compromised" and were actually quite pagan, though they had some respect for the Pentateuch.

Therefore, the Jews in Jerusalem looked upon the Samaritans with disgust. They were not a pure race and they were pagan. The pious Jews (led by the Pharisees) had nothing to do with the Samaritans and would not even walk through their land, lest they come in contact with them. Therefore, it was scandalous for Jesus and his disciples to go there. Not only that, but Jesus ends up talking to a woman and being nice to her and this girl had been married 5 times and was now living with a man she wasn't married to. Instead of shunning her, Jesus talked with her and asked

her if she could get him something to drink. He tells her that he is the Messiah. Jesus was making it very clear to his disciples that people in Samaria need to know about Him. Samaria is specifically named by Christ as being one of the regions they are to go to in order to share the gospel. Providentially, the region of Samaria is one place where the Pharisees and guys like Saul will NOT go. So, these believers are safe in Samaria, but even better, these people are willing to listen to the gospel. How many of them had already heard of Christ, we don't know. But, it doesn't matter who the people are, the message is the same. (gospel)

B. Different people, same response. (6-8)

There are so many things about the book of Acts that I love and one of them is verses 4-8 of chapter 8. Here is where the church displays the power of the gospel. Not only does Philip and others go to Samaria and preach the gospel to people who are ethnically and racially different than they are, but God empowers Philip to do the same miracles that were done among the Jews. God is authenticating the same message to different people so that these different people will have the same response of saving faith. This is one of the enormous story lines of the church. We are different people who have the same gospel, which means we have the same Jesus and we have the same faith in the same Jesus which makes all of us card-carrying members of the same family. God is authenticating the message of the gospel through his servant Philip to the Samaritans. This was not only for their benefit, it was for the benefit of the Jews who had gone there. Over and over and over we learn that the ground is level at the foot of the cross.

Now, our differences are real. We all come to the table with different backgrounds and experiences and with a tendency to have different assumptions about each other. But, when we take the gospel seriously, we have to take the fact of our sinfulness seriously. That means that we should be very committed to humility and learning from one another. And as we give grace to one another to show and receive love from one another, the power of a gospel-family (that's what the church is) is displayed and when a gospel-family is displayed it is a beautiful and unusual thing to behold. There is nothing supernatural about a bunch of Jews meeting together in their own church and calling it a family. There is nothing supernatural about a bunch of white people or black people meeting together in their own respective churches and calling it family. But, when people from different tribes, languages, nationalities, ethnicities, generations, socio-economic groups all meet together and sing the songs of one another and embrace one another and serve one another and care for another and love one another and respect one another and defend one another – now that's supernatural. (That's easy to agree with but when are you going to eat with someone outside of your already normal friend group after church?)

In verses 4-8, we are hearing about the initial response and it is exciting. People are believing and Luke says, "there was much joy in that city." God used the adversity of Jerusalem to advance the joy in Samaria. But, just as Ananias and Sapphira were a defining moment for the church in Jerusalem, another similar situation arose in Samaria that we need to understand.

III. Prosperity Gospel is always a threat. (9-24)

The history of the world involves religion. Sociologists have observed that most of the time, religion is mankind's attempt at explaining and controlling the world. Where the gospel has not

been received, it is common to see magic, spiritism, sorcery and other expressions of the occult. Most of the time, this attempt at harnessing power is for protection from forces beyond control. So, ironically, people try to use dark powers to protect them from dark powers. The village witch doctor was feared because he could influence the dark powers. In order to be protected from sickness, crop failure, accidents on a journey, or from the haunts of the spirits of recently deceased people, you would pay exorbitant fees to the witch doctor who would use his power for you (but only if you gave him enough money). Some people tried to use evil against their enemies, so the idea of incantations, curses, voodoo, etc. was popular.

Simon was a well-known purveyor of power. He was a skilled witch doctor. He claimed to be someone great and because he had influence with darkness, he was feared. He had other worldly abilities. This man had power and had been in this position of influence for a long time. But now, Philip shows up and begins to preach the gospel. Do not forget that Simon is owned by the darkness that he has used to keep himself in power. People feared him while he feared the evil and the evil ones that he made a deal with. Now, Simon comes face to face with a power that does not bow to him, is not intimidated by him and one that he cannot duplicate. He has not seen this before. Wow! Unclean spirits were being cast out of people and these people were being set free. People who had been paralyzed and lame were being healed. Simon was amazed. So, Simon believed, at least that is what it looked like. He was even baptized.

In v.13 Luke makes two interesting observations regarding Simon. 1) he continued with Philip. Which on the surface seems natural, like a young disciple following a teacher, except the word that Luke uses means that he followed him everywhere. There was clearly a personal attachment to Philip. Ok, nothing wrong with that, but then the 2nd observation. 2) “seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.” Luke tells us this to prepare us for what is about to happen.

Word of the Samaritans coming to faith in Jesus gets back to Jerusalem. This is a big deal. Wow, talk about showing up to a white church in the 50's with a black girlfriend, this is turning heads. Momma is shocked and Daddy does not know what to do. But that's the point. When the gospel changes hearts it's going to turn some heads. So, Peter and John go to check it out. And sure enough, they authenticate that these Samaritans are real believers. They profess faith in Christ and they THEN get baptized as evidence of their faith in Christ. But, there was not yet, the evidence of the baptism of the Spirit. So, Peter and John prayed for them to receive this and laid hands on them and these new believers received this aspect of the Spirit's ministry in their lives.

Now, do you see a pattern here? This is exactly what happened to the early believers in Jerusalem. They were believers following the resurrection of Christ. They received the outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. From that point on, everyone who came to faith in Christ, presumably received the evidence of the Spirit's baptism. But, here in Samaria, it was not the case. The reason is obvious. God withheld the manifestation of the Spirit's baptism until Peter and John could witness it, in order to inform the Jewish believers in Jerusalem that what happened to the believers in Samaria was exactly what had happened to the apostles and the 120 in Jerusalem. God was providing for the unity of his body that eventually was going to be made up of people from every tribe, language and nation. We will see this same thing happen again when the gospel is received by full-blooded Gentiles.

But, back to Simon and Samaria. When Simon sees the evidence of the Spirit's power coming on the believers, he wants in on the action. He wants to be the guy who gets to be the source of the power. It is at this point that his true intent is revealed. As far as Simon is concerned, the gospel is not about Jesus, it's about Simon. Peter has apostolic insight and he speaks powerfully and clearly to this and makes it very clear that Simon's profession of belief, was not legitimate. He, like Judas Iscariot was following Jesus for what he could get from it. In this case, the gospel made his role as the village witch doctor, irrelevant. He was trying to adapt to this new power and use it for his purposes like he had before. In a few chapters we will see a similar scenario play out in Philippi. Paul and Silas are trying to minister there, when a demon-possessed slave girl (who is a fortune-teller) keeps shouting that these men are servants of the most High God. Finally, Paul and Silas have had it because that is not the kind of advertising and social media campaign they need and they cast the demon out of her. Well, when her pimps realize that the demon is gone and that she can't tell fortunes anymore and make them money, they go nuclear on Paul and Silas. Same thing is here with Simon. He is bitter. He is enraged at Philip and now Peter and John because they are getting the attention that he thinks he deserved. Everyone loved him and respected him until these Christians showed up, so Simon pretended to be one in order to ride the coattails of this new power for his own purposes. But doesn't Luke say that he believed and was baptized? Yes. Because it looked like he did, initially. (Matthew 13)

Here it is; prosperity gospel. I know that some of you get a little uncomfortable when I call out people like Joel Osteen and Joyce Meyer and other prosperity gospel mouthpieces. But, do you see why I do? This is a serious issue. Use Jesus to get the influence you want. Use Jesus to get the respect you crave. Use Jesus to get the life you want. Use Jesus to get money, success, and health. That is not the gospel. Simon figured that following Jesus was like every other game in town. You pay to play and he was willing to pay in order to get in on the action. Peter could have made a lot of money that day, but that is not the point. Jesus is not your ticket to get on the train to a great life. Jesus is not a mask to make your greed appear to be noble. Jesus is not the ticket. Jesus is the train and the destination.

For those who claim to be followers: why are you following Jesus? (intent is not going to be perfect but do you love Jesus because he is worth it, or because of what you want from him?)

For those of you who are not followers: I am not going to use appeals from this world to entice you to "follow Jesus" as a bait and switch. That is not the message of Jesus.