

The Church Expands

At the time of Stephen's death, persecutions were increasing in intensity. The reign of terror started with the beating of Peter and John (Acts 5:40), and continued for many decades. The new converts to Christ, who had remained in Jerusalem to learn from the apostles, fled Jerusalem into Samaria, Syria, and their homes in other places, just as Jesus had commanded them (Luke 24:47, Acts 1:8). The apostles, however, remained in Jerusalem for some time. It was a time of human suffering, but for the spread of the gospel, it was a miraculous time. The seed planted in Jerusalem spread over the earth, taking root in various places, and growing into the giant kingdom of Daniel 2:44-45.

We read of those scattered abroad, who *"went about preaching the word"* (Acts 8:4). Philip, one of the seven (Acts 6:3-5), went to Samaria. The Samaritans were unusual because they were descendants of the Israelites and foreigners moved there by the Assyrians around 700 B.C. Most Jews thought Samaritans to be of impure blood and hated them. But Jesus taught some at Jacob's well, John 4, and Philip preached the gospel to all that would hear.

"The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed" (Acts 8:6-7). The Holy Spirit performed many of the same signs that Jesus performed through those on whom the apostles laid their hands. Because of these signs, many believed. There are also parallels to the teaching and work of Jesus and the work accomplished by the early church. A few of the examples are:

Jesus said: *"Sell your possessions and give to charity"* (Luke 12:33). *"Sell all that you possess and distribute it to the poor"* (Luke 18:22). In the church: *"There was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need"* (Acts 4:34-35).

Jesus said: *"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit"* (Matthew 28:19). In the church: *"You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything"* (1 Thessalonians 1:6-8).

Jesus said: *"If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me"* (Matthew 16:24). In the church: *"For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews"* (1 Thessalonians 2:14).

Jesus said: *"These signs will accompany those who have believed: in My name they will cast out demons, they will speak with new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover."* (Mark 16:17-18). As Philip taught in Samaria, *"The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming*

out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed” (Acts 8:6-7).

One of the listeners was Simon, a sorcerer (ASV, NKJV), or more appropriately, a magician (ESV, NASV). The word *mageuō* defines one who practices the arts of sleight of hand, juggling, conjuring, magic, and illusion. It is a different word than is used in Galatians 5:20, where the word used there means the use of drugs in witchcraft and opening the mind in idolatry. Unlike many of our magicians today that tell us that they are fooling us, Simon claimed to be a great one who had powers beyond nature. But Simon realized he could not do what the Holy Spirit accomplished through Philip. Many Samaritans, including Simon, believed the things Philip preached and the need to be baptized. The word that people in Samaria had received the gospel reached Jerusalem, and the apostles sent Peter and John to them. Philip could not pass on the ability to prophecy, teach, by the Spirit. And, the gifts of the Spirit were necessary to sustain the church during that time. Therefore, the apostles were needed to “lay hands-on” and impart those gifts until the written word was complete.

Are we prepared to teach the gospel wherever we happen to be? Whether at home, on vacation, or while traveling?