

Acts of the Apostles
Week 4 Summary
Acts 8:1–9:31

Luke describes a great persecution breaking out against the church which results in a scattering of the church. It is important to note that this leads to a fulfillment (in part) of Jesus' command to move from Jerusalem to Judea and to Samaria. It seems it is the hellenistic Jews that are forced to scatter as a result of this persecution. The same Saul who approved of Steven's death is the one who leads this campaign against the church.

Philip, who like Steven, was a hellenistic Jew and Christian (one of the seven deacons) goes into Samaria preaching Christ and performing signs of healing and exorcism. This brings Philip into direct competition with a man named Simon who was a practitioner of magic. We notice that Luke has said of Philip that the people gave him their attention, he now tells us the people used to do this for Simon. The shift in attention from Simon to Philip leads to the people coming to faith in Jesus and receiving baptism; even Simon himself. As he stays close to Philip he is amazed at the power that Philip wields, perhaps foreshadowing what is to come.

It is the responsibility of the apostles to ensure that the gospel is authentically being preached so Peter and John go to Samaria to investigate this work. They affirm the work by laying hands on them and praying, which leads to the outpouring of the Spirit. This is not to create a formula, i.e. that the Spirit is bestowed by laying on of hands, but to show that God is approving of this new work into Samaria where live half-Jews and traditionally at odds with the people of God, i.e. the Jews.

A secondary event arises from the bestowal of the Spirit. Simon who is interested in power witnesses the apostles' ability to give the Spirit and seeks to buy the power and privilege for himself. This results in Peter speaking a word of judgment on him (notice the echoes of Judas and the silver) with a stern warning for him to repent. Simon, knowing their power, asks for them to pray for him. The story ends there. We don't know if Simon repented or if Peter prayed for him and received him back. Tradition indicates that Simon becomes the source of early Christian gnosticism.

Luke continues to describe the pushing of boundaries as he relates Philip's next Spirit-led mission to an Ethiopian eunuch. This man is a god-fearer (meaning he worships the God of Israel, but has not had a full conversion—impossible for him as an eunuch) and a Gentile. As Philip hears him reading the section of Isaiah about the suffering servant he uses that as his launching point to tell the gospel of Jesus which leads to the man being baptized.

Luke, having described the way the gospel continued to move out through the persecution, then turns back to the activities of Saul the persecutor and describes how he comes to the very faith he tries to destroy. Under Roman law the Jewish authority had permission to enact its own justice in the territories. Thus Saul is not moving to those places to bring back Jerusalem based followers of the Way (Christians) for trial. As he is on his way to Damascus he is blinded and confronted by the risen Jesus. He is commanded to go into the city and wait for instruction very similar to Jesus' apostles waiting for the outpouring of the Spirit.

As Paul waits, a vision comes to a Damascus Christian to go to and lay hands on Saul. This is obviously a terrifying proposition for Ananias, but he is obedient and the result is that he regains his sight and he is filled with the Holy Spirit. This also results in Saul beginning his teaching ministry showing how Jesus is the Son of God—a profitable three days of waiting! He is so effective in his preaching (like Steven) he is now the object of persecution so must escape at night. He goes to Jerusalem where everyone is afraid of him and doubtful of his conversion

until Barnabas comes and makes introductions for him. Again he becomes targeted, so is sent home to Tarsus to wait. This ends the first wave of persecution and peace is reestablished.

Faithful Presence
"Chapter Two"

1. Fitch asserts, "The church is more than a space where some individuals gather to affirm they believe in something. It is the place where God's people discern his presence and submit to Christ's concrete rule" (32). What do you think of his distinction? Would you add anything to the description, change anything, or take anything away?
2. Fitch says the great commission is fulfilled by the bringing together of the presence of Christ and the mission of God. Specifically, he says, "[God's] work will begin small, in little places like this. And from there it will expand to change the world on a larger scale" (33). How does this push against the big 'evangelist' meetings we have been used to as the promise for revival? How does this match with what we are seeing in the book of Acts?
3. He lists seven disciplines which will shape us, the church, into his presence (35). What do you think of these seven disciplines? Would you add any others? What do you think about his note regarding baptism and marriage?
4. Finally, Fitch describes these disciplines as being on the move using a model of the close (not closed) circle, dotted circle, and half circle (40). What are your thoughts? Is this helpful or not? What are the potential advantages and disadvantages?