

Text: Ac 8.9-13

Proposition: You will not find effective ministry in sudden sensations but in faithfully preaching the good news of the kingdom.

We are back in Acts 8, “Samaria section.” This is the next big step “away from Jerusalem” as we mentioned last week.

I’m breaking the text up in order to give more of the background detail as we go along, and in order to make specific points about the gospel and the growth of the church.

Last week I wanted to make a point about the impact of our lives on evangelism. The Samaritans came to the gospel in response to authentication by confirming miraculous signs. The only signs our present generation can see is the miracle of sinners living out a holy life.

Today I want to make some points about effective ministry of the gospel.

What makes for effective ministry?

Preachers are very interested in this question. In the Christian book-publishing world, there are countless “preacher books” telling us how ministry should be done. There are methods, there are programs, there are examples of the latest and greatest that some other preacher in some other place has found “successful”.

Over the years, I’ve seen various “fads” come and go about how you should build a local church. In some cases, churches have sprung up with surprising numbers quite quickly, only to falter, stagnate, and some have even disappeared as a new method or personality develops a new popular way to “do church.”

As we work through the book of Acts, we are going to see progress in the life of the church. We need to look at the passages carefully so we can get a good idea of what is really going on. Where is the power that built the New Testament church? What is it centered on?

I think that such biblical analysis will yield wise counsel for us as we seek to preach Christ and please God in our community.

Read Ac 8.4-13, text 9-13

Proposition: The Christian church begins, grows, and continues on simple faith, not religious sensation.

I. Character of sensational religion (9-11)

In this part of the message, I'm going to add in a good deal of background material. First, let's work through the details of the text.

A. Their former religion: hucksterism

1. Led by a man named Simon (9)

a. Former activity: practicing magic

"Philo (*Spec. Laws* 3.18 §§100–101) notes two types of magic: (1) a respectable science of discernment tied to Persian magi and kings and (2) an 'adulterated' species full of quacks, charms, and incantations (Eckey 2000: 190–92)." ¹

b. Former audience: the people of Samaria

c. Former claims to greatness

2. Attitude of the Samaritans (10)

a. Universal attention (same word used in v. 6 and v. 11)

1) Root has the idea of "bringing towards one's self, bringing near"

2) As if you have an intensely interesting object and are bringing it close for careful scrutiny

b. High regard: adulation

"That his personal claims were considerably beyond the ordinary is indicated by the acclamation of the people that he was that divine power called 'the Great Power' (v. 10). Whatever else might be said of Simon, he seems to have made some claim to at least embody the very power of God." ²

¹ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 326–27.

² John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary 26 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 215.

3. Repetition (for emphasis?) (11)

- a. Again states their attention to Simon
- b. Gives the reason: long time *astonishing* them
 - 1) This is the same word I noted in our study of the Gospels on Wednesday nights
 - a) When Jairus' daughter was raised, they were "astonished with great astonishment"
 - b) Word root has the idea of "standing outside oneself"
 - c) We get the word *ecstasy* from this root
 - 2) This word plays a big part in our passage today, inspires my title (*Astonishing Appearances*), will come back to this later

"Simon promoted himself, but Philip preached Christ."³

"I believe that Simon is the first religious racketeer in the church—but, unfortunately, not the last."⁴

B. Who is this Simon?

1. One of my commentaries: "Luke clearly depicted Simon as a worker of magic, a charlatan who made money from his bag of tricks."⁵
2. Outside the Bible, we have some commentary
 - a. Justin Martyr, an early church Father, mentions a heretical sect led by this Simon
 - 1) Justin Martyr was himself a Samaritan, born in a pagan family
 - 2) Became a Christian in AD 130, eventually moving to Rome where he had a Christian school
 - 3) Wrote defenses of Christianity to the Romans (an apologist)

³ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ac 8.12.

⁴ J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible Commentary*, electronic ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 543.

⁵ Polhill, *Acts*, 215.

b. According to Justin, this Simon

- 1) Was also a Samaritan
- 2) Almost all of the Samaritans of his day worshipped him as ‘the first god.’
- 3) Came to Rome in the days of Claudius, convinced Romans to worship him
- 4) Had a statue erected in Rome in his honor, “to the holy god Simon”
- 5) Accompanied by a former prostitute, Helen, supposed by his followers to be ‘the first idea generated’ by Simon

c. Irenaeus, a later church father, also mentioned a similar cult

Caution: “It is quite possible that the Simon of Acts had virtually no connection with Justin’s Simonians but was ‘co-opted’ by the later Gnostic group to give a New Testament rootage for their movement.”⁶

3. Why consider this outside material?

- a. Justin, as a Samaritan, much closer to these events in history, just 100 years in the past for him, carries weight
- b. More important: The attention the Samaritans paid to Simon *formerly* fit the comments of Justin – fraudulent wonder-worker, gaining followers

All this bolsters this point of my message: **Character of sensational religion**

C. Sensational religion is a common human phenomenon

1. You can’t read a history of ancient Greece or Rome without encountering sensationalistic religion
2. Sensationalistic religion exists to this day
 - a. Millions of people bow down to stone idols that represent the ancient wonder worker, Buddha

⁶ Polhill, 216.

b. Millions of others bow down to multitudes of idols in India

These millions nevertheless have a high level of civilization – they are not *mere animists*

c. In spite of the secular nihilism of the west, the most popular form of Christianity is the sensationalistic charismatic movement

1) Nihilism: “total rejection of established laws and institutions.”

2) Nihilism may be too extreme to describe our culture, but we *are* approaching it as a dominant thought pattern

3) In the face of this, many people are lured to *sensation*, thinking that in this they can be personally in touch with God

This was the kind of religion *formerly* held by the Samaritans ... then Philip came

II. Conversion to word-based religion (12)

A. Philip *did* come with wonders (vv. 6-7), but the focus of Samaritan conversion wasn't “superior wonders” by Philip

B. What brought about Samaritan conversion?

1. They believed Philip's preaching

2. The content of Philip's preaching

a. The good news of the Kingdom of God — God's program of redemption

b. The name of Jesus Christ – God's person of redemption, the Messiah, the promised one

Perhaps some of these people met Jesus on his visit to Sychar

Regardless, all these new believers met Jesus in the preaching of Philip

C. What demonstrated their conversion?

1. They were baptized

a. The tense of “belief” indicates the moment of decision

b. The tense of “baptize” indicates an ongoing process by many

2. The converts were many, both men and women

- a. Clearly, baptism here is water baptism because Spirit baptism will occur in v. 17 for these people
- b. They are marking a new allegiance, no longer following Simon, but following Christ

“The contrasts and comparisons between Simon and Philip are striking. Both performed miracles, Simon by demonic power and Philip by divine power. Simon boasted and welcomed acclaim to himself, but Philip proclaimed Christ. People were amazed at Simon’s magic, but people were converted to Christ by Philip’s ministry.”⁷

D. Their conversion was “word-based” not *sensation* based

1. They were *paying attention* to Simon
2. They were *baptized* into fellowship with Christ by Philip

Christian conversion, and Christian religion, is firstly a *word-based* religion.

- Not dependent on experience
- But resting on the revealed Word of God

Have you believed the Word of God?

III. Compulsion to continue in sensation (13)

A. The astonishment continues: *Simon* believed

1. There is a great deal of discussion by preachers and commentaries on this point

Did Simon really believe?

- a. The word in v. 13 is identical to the word in v. 12

⁷ Stanley D. Toussaint, “Acts,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 373.

- b. Subsequent revelation (not outside Bible information) indicate something is amiss (at least)
 - c. The text isn't clear on this point, but I lean to the view that he didn't really believe — this is a false conversion, in my opinion
2. Nevertheless, no doubt the conversion of “the great Simon” was a sensational bit of news

We will come back to this question next week

B. Simon's astonishment

- 1. We see at least a profession of faith, “Simon himself believed”
- 2. We see that his profession is accepted, “after being baptized”
- 3. We see the focus of his interests:
 - a. He continued with Philip (as if Philip couldn't get rid of him, he was always hanging around)
 - b. He observed with great astonishment Philip's signs and great miracles

Of all people, Simon would know whether his own magic was “real” or “fake”

In Philip, it seems, Simon has found someone who could *really do it* — and it seems that his interest was in finding out *how*.

4. What should be the focus of a new believer?
- a. Knowing Christ
 - b. Following Christ
 - c. Being a disciple
 - d. Learning the ways of Christ

Whatever Simon was, there was something wrong with his profession of following Christ.

Conclusion:

Proposition: The Christian church begins, grows, and continues on simple faith, not religious sensation.

We reject the Charismatic movement for many reasons, and one of them is their intense desire for *sensation*.

True religion is not found in “thrill seeking.” It is found in obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Do you have faith? Do you believe? Seek to know Jesus Christ, don’t seek experiences “to make you get the religious shivers.”