

SCRIPTURE STUDIES

SERIES: A SURVEY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS**ACTS CHAPTER 8 – Part 2****THE GENUINE AND THE COUNTERFEIT****Acts 8:5-40**

We are learning what it was like in the early days of Christianity as we move methodically through the book of Acts. We are seeing that not everything was a bed of roses. The early church faced many crises and we are learning how they dealt with them.

In this eighth chapter we have a new challenge to the progress of the church. It is a spiritual law that where there is truth there will also be error lurking close by; where there is good, there will be evil not far away; if there is that which is pure, there will also be that which is polluted; where there is that which is genuine, there will also be that which is counterfeit - the devil will see to that!

Nowhere is this contrast more obvious than here in Acts chapter 8 where there are two prominent personalities, one is true, the other false; one is interested in ministry, the other is interested in money. Their names? Philip and Simon. Here we see God's Messenger and the devil's magician.

As Acts Chapter 8 begins, persecution against the church had broken out on a wide scale; it was led by a man named Saul who was conducting his own holy war. As a result of the heat of persecution being turned up, the Christians began fleeing from Jerusalem. Verse four records, *"They that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the gospel."*

One of the Christians, Phillip, who was one of the first deacons, left Jerusalem, went to Samaria and began preaching. (vs.5-8) As a result of his ministry in Samaria there was quite a revival. Verse 8 sums up his preaching campaign in Samaria with these words, *"There was great joy in that city."*

Not to be outdone, the devil tried to take advantage of the situation. Open persecution had not stopped the church, it only spread the church. It seems that the devil said, "If you can't beat them, join them." So, one of the devil's helpers, Simon, infiltrated the camp of the Christians. Let us look at this false witness first, and then we will look at the true witness.

I. THE COUNTERFEIT. (vs.8-24)**A. His Name. (v.8)**

"But there was a certain man called Simon...."

There are two Simons in this eighth chapter of Acts. "Simon" was a very common name. This

first mentioned Simon is not to be confused with Simon Peter who was sent to Samaria from Jerusalem by the apostles to check out what was taking place there. (v.14)

B. His Claim. (v.9)

“... who previously practiced sorcery in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great....”

This Simon was a witch doctor, a magician who held the people in fear by his incantations. He bewitched people by sleight of hand and dazzled their judgment by feats performed mysteriously. According to the Clementine Homilies, volume 1, page 22, "He gave himself out as the Highest Power." Justin Martyr writes that Simon visited Rome in the time of Claudius and established himself so highly that the Roman Senate decreed him divine honors and a statue was erected on the island of Tiber. In 1574, on the same spot, there was dug up a statue with the inscription, "Semoni Sanco Deo Fidio" meaning "Simon Sacred Deity."

C. His Fame. (v.10)

“.....to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, “This man is the great power of God.” Or, as the NASB translates it: “This man is what is called the Great Power of God.” Verse 11 continues, “And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time.”

William Barclay writes that such persons as Simon, “Deluded themselves before they deluded others.” One of the pathetic things about all of this is to see people exploited by those who would take advantage of their physical and spiritual needs for material gain. This we have seen in our own day.

D. His Game.

“Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done.” (v.13) “And when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles’ hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money, saying, “Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” (vs.18-19)

Simon's faith had more holes in it than Swiss cheese. He faked faith in order to gain what he perceived were the tricks of the trade that the apostles had, in order to add to the bag of tricks that he already had. His was not a genuine, saving faith.

“He pretended and professed that he did believe, what others did.” (Gill)

“He was but a hypocrite, and really in *“the gall of bitterness and bond of iniquity.”* Afterwards he apostatized from Christianity.” (Henry)

“He was willing to profess himself to be his follower. It might have injured his popularity, moreover, if he had taken a stand in opposition when so many were professing to become Christians. People often profess religion because, if they do not, they fear that they will lose their influence, and be left with the ungodly. That Simon was not a real Christian is apparent from the whole narrative.” (Albert Barnes)

E. His Shame. (vs.20-23)

“But Peter said to him, “Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity.”

Anytime you find a successful ministry for the Lord, there will always be people trying to cash in on it. In Samaria, there was a classic example of a phony who looked genuine; of the false who looked true.

There are at least five characteristics of phony religious leaders in this story:

1. Exalting a person other than Jesus Christ. (v.9) Simon was a man who believed that he was something great, and people began to gather around him and believe in him.
2. Drawing a following based upon fleshly impressions and attractions. (v.10) This man made no mention of the Word of God or of Jesus Christ. He drew people to himself. They were impressed and attracted to him personally by what he did and who he claimed to be.
3. Exercising a counterfeit power. (v.11) Simon had the attention of many people, not because of his message, but because of his magic and methodology. He had power, but the power was not from God.
4. Going through religious motions for the wrong motives. (vs.12,13) Luke tells us that Simon believed and was even baptized. He was amazed at what he had seen Philip do and he wanted to do the same things. His interest was solely for self-aggrandizement.
5. Preoccupation with the material rather than the spiritual. (vs.18-21) Simon had the idea that what Philip had was something that could be purchased with money. He wanted to add the ability to do what Philip was doing to his repertoire of tricks. What he was attempting to do was for gain.

The practice in which Simon was engaged did not cease with his death. We have seen a plague, a scourge of this same thing in our day. In this century the public's confidence in Christianity, churches, and particularly preachers, has, to some extent, been eroded due to exactly the same shenanigans in which Simon was involved.

Simon was the cause of a new word being added to our vocabulary. It is the word “simony.” The word means, “The buying or selling of sacraments or benefits.” It was a common practice in the middle ages by which an office, such as bishop, could be purchased with money. It has come to describe the practice of buying and selling religious favors.

However, it must be stressed, that the vast majority of truly born-again servants of God are still faithful, still true and still trustworthy! If one surgeon botches a surgical procedure,

we do not shun all surgeons; if one banker absconds with bank funds, we do not avoid all bankers and banks; if one congressman is a crook, we have no justification for denouncing all congressman; if one Christian servant defects from the faith for whatever reason, that does not mean that all Christian servants will fail.

If there is one false leader in Samaria, like Simon, that does not mean that all leaders in Samaria were also false. Philip, Peter and John were true men of God and God vindicates His own. In spite of the counterfeits there are always the genuine and God's work goes on.

II. THE GENUINE. (vs. 26-40)

Philip was a genuine servant of God. He was genuinely interested in pointing people to Christ, not in attracting people to himself. In verses 26-40 we read the account of the evangelization of an individual by Philip. The account is both interesting and inspiring. However, I wish to point out that the account is also informative: it informs all would-be witnesses about the privilege and process of witnessing, drawn from Philip's example. Consider:

A. The Prerequisites For Personal Work.

1. Sensitivity to the Holy Spirit's direction. Acts 8:26
"Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, 'Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' This is desert."
2. Humble obedience.
"So he arose and went." (Acts 8:27)
 - a. He left his Samaria for the wilderness.
 - b. He left the city for the desert.
 - c. He left the crowds for the individual. God is concerned about individuals as well as crowds. (Compare Acts 8:6 with Acts 8:26 and 27.)
3. Boldness.
"He opened his mouth." (Acts 8:35a)
4. Knowledge of the Word of God.
"He began at the same Scripture and preached to him Jesus." (Acts 8:35b)

Illustration: Dr. F. B. Meyer, the famous preacher from Great Britain, told the story about to professing Christians who worked in the same business office. Over the years, neither of them knew that the other was a professing Christian. One of these men said to his minister one day, "Wasn't it funny that Bill and I were so close to each other in business, but neither of us knew until recently that the other was a Christian!" "Funny?" Said the minister, "Why that's not funny! It's tragic! In my opinion neither of you have ever been born-again. Let us get down on our knees and let us both asked that God will make you a new creature in Christ Jesus."

B. The Principles of Personal Work.

1. All need the gospel regardless of condition, color, creed or country.
2. Religion is no substitute for salvation. The Ethiopian was religious, but he needed Christ. He had gone to the world's most religious city, Jerusalem, seeking and was

returning home yet seeking.

3. *“Be ready always to give an answer to everyone that asks you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear.”* (1 Peter 3:15)

C. The Procedures in Personal Work.

1. Begin where people are -- the Ethiopian was reading Isaiah chapter 53, and Philip *“began at the same Scripture.”*
2. Use the Word of God, not argumentation.
3. Press lovingly for a decision. Acts 8:37
4. Urge an open confession by baptism.

SUMMATION

There are three types of witnesses:

A. There is the false witness.

The false witness is exemplified by Simon the witch-doctor in Samaria. We are not to think however, that all false witnesses are slight of hand soothsayers. There are sincere religious leaders who are preaching a false message. Paul warned the believers in Galatia of those who would preach a false gospel: *“I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.”* (Gal.1:6-9)

B. There is the true witness.

Philip is a beautiful example of a true witness. He had the glory of God as his motivation; He had the salvation of a soul as his mission; he had the gospel as his message. The test of authenticity is: *“A true witness delivers souls, but a deceitful witness speaks lies.”* (Prov.14:25) The true witness delivers from the bondage of sin and Satan. The false witness puts souls into bondage. Paul warned the Galatians to *“Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.”* (Gal.5:1)

C. There is the silent witness.

The true witness is one who has experienced the life-changing power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He/she has repented of sin and received the Savior. They have passed from death to new life in Christ *and* testifies to others by life and lip of the change that Christ Jesus has wrought in their life. However, the silent witness is, well, just that: silent! Their lips are sealed.

I am reminded of the account of the four lepers in the Old Testament who were outside the city of Samaria starving. They discovered that the Syrians, who had invaded Samaria, had suddenly fled, leaving the city's food supply behind. They went into the city and began to gorge themselves on food when they suddenly thought of other hungry people.

“Then they said to one another, “We are not doing right. This day is a day of good news, and we remain silent.” (II Kings 7:9)

It is a common saying among active soul-winners, that a true witness is like a beggar who has found bread and tells other beggars where bread can be found. The silent witness has found in Christ the Bread of Life but they do not share the good news that Jesus is the Bread of Life. Most Christians, unfortunately, fall into this category. Which are you? A false, true or silent witness?

Illustration: A Christian girl and a missionary were in love. Before he left for India he wrote and asked her to become his wife. He said, "If I do not hear from you, I will know you have other plans." She immediately wrote a letter and accepted his proposal for marriage. She asked her brother to mail the letter for her, but it was never mailed! The girl never heard from the missionary again. Years later she found the letter in the lining of her brother's coat, yellowed and crumpled pieces of paper. It had slipped through the lining when the brother had put it into his torn pocket and he had forgotten to mail it. The man who was loved never got the love message.

Jesus has given us a message to take to others who are loved by God. If we do not carry the message faithfully to those to whom it was intended, we are silent witnesses!

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An alternative outline of chapter eight:

Philip Evangelizes Samaria, vs. 4-8

Philip Encounters a Sorcerer, vs. 9-25

Philip Engages a Searcher, vs. 26-40)

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