



## The Expansion of the Church through Persecution (Acts 8:1-25)

*Commentary: Week Fifteen*

*\*\*Scripture divisions used in our series and various commentaries differ from each other.  
This is the reason for the occasional discrepancy between  
the verse range listed in our series and the commentary notes provided in our Scripture Studies.*

### New American Commentary<sup>1</sup>

#### 5. Persecution and Dispersal of the Hellenists [8:1b-3](#)

[Acts 8:1b-3](#) is a transitional section, providing both a conclusion to the account of Stephen's martyrdom and an introduction to the witness of the Christians who were dispersed from Jerusalem as a result of the persecution following Stephen's death. At first sight the sequence of events seems somewhat out of order. First, the persecution and dispersal are mentioned (v. [1b](#)). Then follows the notice about Stephen's burial (v. [2](#)). Finally, Saul is designated as the prime persecutor (v. [3](#)). One would have expected the more natural sequence to have been the burial of Stephen, the resulting persecution, the role of Saul, and the dispersal of the Christians. Luke's ordering of the events, however, is carefully constructed. By placing the burial of Stephen as the middle term between two references to the persecution, he emphasized the close connection between Stephen's martyrdom and the persecution of the church.

[8:1b](#) The reference to "that day" in v. [1b](#) means that at that very time, following the death of Stephen, a great persecution arose against the Christians. The opposition to the Christians had been gaining momentum throughout chaps. [4-6](#). It came first from the Jewish officials in the arrest of the apostles and the two hearings before the Sanhedrin. The first resulted in a warning ([4:21](#)); the second, in a flogging ([5:40](#)). With the Hellenist Stephen came a third Sanhedrin trial, and this one resulted in death for the Christian witness ([7:58-60](#)). The new factor was that this time the officials had the backing of the people ([6:12](#)).

The opposition did not end with Stephen's death. If anything, his bold witness in both his Sanhedrin testimony and his death only served to fuel the flames. A violent persecution erupted, and the Christians were forced to flee Jerusalem—i.e., "all except the apostles." This note probably indicates that the real opposition was against Stephen's fellow Hellenists. The resistance began in the Hellenist synagogue ([6:9](#)) and was surely escalated by Stephen's prophetic critique of the Jewish worship and nationalistic religion. The Hellenist vision of an "unbounded God" was intolerable, particularly for the "Zionists" of the Diaspora-Jewish synagogues; and they unleashed their fury on these Greek-speaking Christian "radicals" in their midst. The apostles and their fellow Aramaic-speaking Christians had not taken such a radical stance but had remained faithful to the Jewish institutions; thus they were likely able to remain in Jerusalem unmolested. In any event, they were in the city throughout the subsequent narrative (cf. [8:14](#); [9:26-28](#); [11:22](#), [27](#)). Their Greek-speaking Hellenist brothers like Philip were persecuted and forced to flee the city (cf. [11:19-21](#)). Luke's word for their dispersal (*diaspeirō*) comes from the Greek word for

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1. John B. Polhill, *New American Commentary – Volume 26: Acts*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 209-220.

“seed.” They were scattered like one scatters seed. But scattered seed grow, and the irony is that the persecution and scattering of the Christians only led to their further increase. With the dispersal of the Hellenist Christians, the fulfillment of the second phase of Jesus’ commission began—the witness to all Judea and Samaria ([8:1b](#); cf. [1:8](#)).

**8:2** In between the references to persecution comes the closing note of the Stephen narrative (v. [2](#)). In a real sense his martyrdom drew first blood for the Jewish opposition, and they turned their fury on his Hellenist comrades. Stephen was given a proper burial by “godly men,” probably some of his fellow Jewish-Christians. It was an act of real courage on their part. Jewish law forbade funeral observances for a condemned criminal; and even if Stephen had been the victim of mob violence, those who stoned him surely viewed him as a blasphemer and law breaker. One is reminded of the similar courage shown by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus in the burial of Jesus.

**8:3** Luke now turned his attention to Saul (v. [3](#)), the third reference to him in six verses. The “escalation” of his opposition to the Christians is interesting. First, he was presented as a bystander at Stephen’s martyrdom ([7:58](#)). Then we are informed that he gave full mental assent to the stoning of Stephen ([8:1a](#)). Then his consent led to full involvement. He became the church’s worst enemy (v. [3](#)). Indeed, he is portrayed as the persecution personified. He is described as attempting to “ravage” the church (“destroy”). The Greek word is *lymainō*, a strong expression that is used in the Septuagint for wild beasts, such as lions, bears, and leopards tearing at raw flesh. He is said to have gone “from house to house,” possibly a reference to his breaking into their “house church” assemblies. In any event, his fury stopped at nothing. He turned against women as well as men, dragging them to court, throwing them in prison. The picture is totally consistent with his own testimony elsewhere in Acts ([22:4f.](#); [26:10f.](#)) and in his epistles ([1 Cor 15:9](#); [Gal 1:13, 23](#); [Phil 3:6](#); [1 Tim 1:13](#)). So much did he embody the persecution in his own person that the church is described as experiencing “peace” upon his conversion ([9:31](#)).

## **6. The Witness of Philip [8:4–40](#)**

Beginning with [Acts 8:4](#), the story of the church’s witness in all Judea and in Samaria unfolds. It extends throughout the whole of chaps. [8–11](#). Philip and the apostles witnessed to the Samaritans ([8:1–25](#)), and Philip witnessed to an Ethiopian at the Judean border and in the coastal cities ([8:26–40](#)). Paul was converted in Damascus, to which the Christian witness had already extended ([9:1–31](#)). Peter witnessed in the cities along the coast and to a Gentile God-fearer in Caesarea ([9:32–10:48](#)). The church in Antioch, established by Hellenists, began reaching out to the Gentile population ([11:19–30](#)). By the end of chap. [11](#) all of “Judea” in its broadest territorial sense of “land of the Jews” had been evangelized. Not only territorially but also ethnically, all the barriers had been crossed; and the stage was set for Paul’s extensive witness to the Greco-Roman world.

In a real sense the ministry of the “Hellenist” Philip foreshadowed this entire development and anticipated the fulfillment of Christ’s commission ([1:8](#)). It was Philip who began the witness to Samaria ([8:4–25](#)), and his conversion of an Ethiopian in a real sense was a witness “to the ends of the earth” ([8:26–40](#)).

### **(1) The Mission in Samaria [8:4–25](#)**

The witness to the Samaritans falls into two natural divisions. There is the initial ministry of Philip (vv. [4–8](#)). This is followed by the participation of Peter and John in the Samaritan mission (vv. [14–17](#)). The two passages are linked together by the shadowy figure of Simon the magician (vv. [9–13](#), [18–24](#)).

PHILIP’S WITNESS TO THE SAMARITANS ([8:4–8](#)). **8:4** The persecution did not hamper the witness of the Hellenists. If anything, it increased it as they came forth from Jerusalem, preaching the gospel wherever

they went (v. [4](#)). Among them was Philip, one of the seven Hellenists who had been set aside for overseeing the daily distribution to the Greek-speaking widows ([6:5](#)). He went north of Jerusalem to Samaria and proclaimed Christ in one of their cities. The majority of late manuscripts have Philip going to “the city of Samaria,” but that was most unlikely. “The city of Samaria” would designate Sebaste, the capital of Samaria, which had been rebuilt by Herod the Great in Hellenistic style and named for Caesar Augustus. That is not likely where Philip witnessed because its population was predominantly Gentile pagan.

Philip is pictured as witnessing to “Samaritans” proper, those of Samaritan descent and religious persuasion. Their holy city was ancient Shechem, at the foot of Mt. Gerazim. This may have been the Samaritan city in which Philip preached. In preaching to them, Philip was taking a major new step in the fulfillment of Christ’s commission. To this point the church’s witness had been exclusively to Jews (though Jesus himself had ministered in this area; cf. [John 4](#)).

From a Jewish perspective the Samaritans were a sort of *tertium quid*, neither Jew nor Gentile. They were descended from the northern tribes of Israel, the old kingdom of “Israel” that had fallen to the Assyrians in 722 B.C. Those who were not taken captive to Assyria but remained in the land intermarried extensively with the native Canaanite population and the peoples whom the Assyrians resettled in the conquered territory. These Samaritan descendants of the old northern tribes considered themselves still to be the people of God. They had their own form of the Pentateuch for their holy Scriptures, circumcised their sons, and built a temple on Mt. Gerazim to rival the one in Jerusalem (cf. [John 4:20](#)). The Hasmonean king John Hyrcanus (135–104 B.C.) destroyed their temple and made them subservient to the Jews. Later liberated by the Romans from Jewish domination, they continued to worship God in their own independent manner and to look for the *taheb*, a prophet-like messiah who would restore the true worship on Gerazim, a messianic expectation based on [Deut 18:15](#) (cf. [John 4:25](#)). The Jewish prejudice against the Samaritans is well-known. To the Jews the Samaritans were half-breeds and heretics. Philip’s venture into a Samaritan mission was a radical step toward Stephen’s vision of a gospel free of nationalistic prejudices.

**[8:5–8](#)** Philip is described as preaching to them “the Christ” (v. [5](#)). The Samaritans had their own messianic viewpoint involving the *Taheb*. Philip undoubtedly had to lead them to a fuller understanding of the true Messiah just as Jesus had to do with the Samaritan woman ([John 4:25f.](#)) and just as Peter had to do in setting forth the unheard-of concept of a suffering Messiah to the Jewish crowds in Jerusalem ([Acts 3:18](#)). Philip’s preaching, like that of the Jerusalem apostles, was undergirded by “signs,” miracles that pointed beyond themselves to the power and life to be found in the one he proclaimed (v. [6](#)). Demons were exorcised. Paralytics and lame persons were healed (v. [7](#)). Ultimately, it was the gospel they responded to, not the miracles (v. [12](#)). Miracles can assist faith but never can be a substitute for it. When the miraculous assumes priority, it can actually become a hindrance to faith. (Nowhere is that more clearly evident than in the story of Simon that follows.) The paragraph on Philip’s witness ends on a note of joy. Compare the similar note on the Ethiopian’s joy at his baptism (v. [39](#)). The gospel is the great equalizer. In the gospel there are no “half-breeds,” no physical rejects, no place for any human prejudices. There is acceptance for all, joy for all, “great joy for all the people” ([Luke 2:10](#)).

PHILIP AND SIMON ([8:9–13](#)). **[8:9–10](#)** Now a shadowy figure appears on the scene. There was a man named Simon, who had been practicing magic among the Samaritans and for a long time had astounded them with his tricks. Like Theudas ([5:36](#)) he had been somewhat pretentious, boasting “that he was someone great.” 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.

Luke clearly depicted Simon as a worker of magic, a charlatan who made money from his bag of tricks. Had we only the account in Acts, there would never have been any question about whether he ever was

anything more. The early church fathers, however, tell of a heretical Gnostic sect of Simonians in the second and third centuries who traced their beliefs back to the Simon of Acts. The earliest account is that of Justin Martyr from the middle of the second century. Justin was himself a Samaritan and wrote that Simon, a Samaritan from the village of Gitto, was worshiped by “almost all” of the Samaritans of his day as “the first god.” Dating his rise to acclaim in the reign of Claudius, he spoke of Simon’s journey to Rome, where he was worshiped as a god and had a statue erected to him with the inscription “to the holy god Simon.” Justin also noted that he was accompanied by a female named Helen, who had been a former prostitute, whom his followers claimed to be “the first idea generated by him.” Writing toward the end of the second century, Irenaeus attributed a much more elaborate system to the Simonians. 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.

[8:11–13](#) Simon may have held the attention of the Samaritans for a long time with his dazzling tricks (v. [11](#)). That completely changed with the preaching of Philip (v. [12](#)). The content of the preaching is variously described in this passage. In v. [4](#) it is “the word”; in v. [5](#), “the Christ”; and in v. [12](#), “the kingdom of God” and “the name of Jesus Christ.” All refer to the same reality, the salvation that is in no other name ([4:12](#)). It has sometimes been argued that there was something incomplete about the Samaritans’ experience, that they only believed Philip and the rational content of his message without the sort of commitment that constitutes true faith. There is really nothing in the text, however, to indicate any deficiency on their part; and if Luke had wished to communicate this, he would have certainly made it more explicit. The Samaritans entrusted themselves to the gospel and were baptized en masse, men and women. Simon also “believed” and was baptized (v. [13](#)). Luke gave us more reason to question his commitment. There is no object given for his believing—no “kingdom of God,” no “name of Jesus Christ.” In fact, the only response connected with his baptism was his following Philip everywhere, totally entranced by his miraculous signs. Could this have been Luke’s way of indicating that Simon’s commitment was lacking, more based on Philip’s miracles than his preaching, more oriented toward the tricks of his own trade?

PETER AND JOHN AND THE SAMARITANS ([8:14–17](#)).

[8:14–17](#) The focus shifted from Philip and even Simon, for the moment, and centered on Peter and John, who had been sent by the Jerusalem apostles upon hearing of the Samaritan reception of the gospel (v. [14](#)). This action could be interpreted as somewhat presumptuous, the mother church checking out this upstart mission. The drift of the text, however, indicates quite the opposite. Peter and John came more as participants, offering the endorsement and support of the apostles in this new missionary enterprise. That the Samaritans had not yet received the Holy Spirit (v. [16](#)) is certainly not the usual pattern of Acts. Normally the receipt of the Spirit was closely joined to baptism as part of the normative experience of conversion and commitment to Christ (cf. [2:38](#)). This is certainly the case with Paul’s conversion, where healing, receipt of the Spirit, and baptism are closely joined together ([9:17–18](#)). This was the case also with Cornelius and his fellow Gentiles who received the Spirit first and then were immediately baptized ([10:44–48](#)).

The closest parallel to the experience of the Samaritans is that of the disciples of John in Ephesus, who were first baptized and then received the Spirit when Paul laid his hands upon them ([19:5–6](#)). Obviously Acts presents no set pattern. The Spirit is connected with becoming a Christian. Sometimes the Spirit is connected with the laying on of hands, sometimes not. Sometimes coming of the Spirit precedes baptism. Sometimes it follows. The Spirit “blows where it wills” ([John 3:8](#)); the Spirit cannot be tied down to any manipulative human schema.

The current passage is the most difficult case of them all. Why was the receipt of the Spirit so disconnected from the Samaritans’ baptism? Luke indicated that such a separation was not normal by

the little word “simply” in v. [16](#). They had “simply been baptized”—one would usually have expected them to have received the Spirit as well. Many interpreters point to the significance of the experience being one of an outward demonstration of the Spirit in some visible sign that Simon could “see” (v. [18](#)). Therefore this does not rule out the Spirit’s having worked inwardly in them at the point of their initial conviction and commitment. Interpreters also have noted that it was not an individual as much as a community experience when the Spirit fell on them in an outward demonstration of power, much as it had at Pentecost ([2:3–4](#)) and much as it would later with Cornelius and his fellow Gentiles ([10:44](#)). It is not without justification that many refer to this as the “Samaritan Pentecost.” It is a major stage of salvation history. The Spirit as it were indicated in a visible manifestation the divine approval of this new missionary step beyond Judaism.

There is further significance to the Samaritan experience occurring in two stages. Through Peter and John’s participation, the Samaritan mission was given the stamp of approval of the mother church in Jerusalem. It was not just the undertaking of a maverick Hellenist missionary. It was endorsed, received, and enthusiastically participated in by the whole church. But is there any significance in the fact that the Spirit was received through the apostles laying their hands on the Samaritans? Some would see this as an indication of a rite of “confirmation” separate from and subsequent to baptism. Again the evidence of Acts will not bear this reading of the practice of a later age back into the New Testament text. Peter and John’s laying on of their hands is best seen as a gesture of the apostolic solidarity and fellowship with the Samaritans. The receipt of the Spirit is above all God’s answer to their prayer (v. [15](#)).

PETER AND SIMON ([8:18–24](#)).

[8:18–19](#) Just as Philip’s miracles caught Simon’s attention, so the visible outpouring of the Spirit was absolutely irresistible to the magician. Just what he “saw,” the text does not say (v. [18](#)). Luke was not interested in the concrete mode of the Spirit’s appearance, only in the fact that the Spirit came to the Samaritans in an objective, verifiable fashion. Whether Simon himself received the Spirit is also not related. One would assume he did not from the drift of the text. He appears as more the onlooker than the participant, and his behavior scarcely betrays any spiritual enlightenment on his part. As a professional Simon was impressed with the commercial possibilities of the phenomenon he had just witnessed. He therefore offered Peter and John money for the trade secret of how to dispense the Spirit through the laying on of one’s hands. Though a complete misunderstanding of the Holy Spirit, Simon’s behavior was completely in character for a professional magician. Tricks of the trade were often exchanged among them in financial transactions. They were viewed almost as commercial commodities (cf. the enormous “market value” of the magical scrolls Paul persuaded the Ephesians to burn—[Acts 19:19](#)).

[8:20](#) In his characteristic role as spokesman, Peter responded for himself and John: “May your money perish with you” (v. [20](#)). Peter’s words could be viewed as a prediction as much as a condemnation. Simon’s greed was leading him down the path toward eternal destruction. Throughout Acts human greed is always depicted as a most destructive force. It certainly was so for Judas ([1:18](#)) and for Ananias and Sapphira ([5:1–11](#)). It would continue to be so in many subsequent episodes in Acts. Simon was in severe danger that his avarice would destroy him as well. Simon was explicitly depicted as wanting the right to dispense the Spirit, but he probably desired the ability to manipulate the Spirit at his own will, to be able to work miracles and the like (cf. v. [13](#)). But one can never manipulate the Spirit; he is always God’s “gift” (v. [20](#)) and never subject to the human will. Even in this instance, the Spirit came as God’s response to the apostles’ prayer. Simon completely misunderstood when he saw the Spirit as coming through the human gesture of the apostles’ laying their hands on the Samaritans. He was viewing the whole matter through a magician’s eyes. But Christianity has nothing to do with magic, and God’s Spirit is not subject to a charlatan’s manipulation—not in Simon’s day or for any profit-making Christian charlatan of our own day. The term “simony” has come into our vocabulary from this incident; however, it is too restrictive, referring primarily to the attempt to secure ecclesiastical office or privilege through



monetary means. Were the term fully based on Simon's behavior, it would be extended to cover any attempt to manipulate God for personal gain.

**8:21–23** Peter's confrontation with Simon was particularly harsh (v. [21](#)). In the Old Testament "part or share" refers to the privileges of belonging to God's people and sharing the inheritance he has granted. To be denied this share is a virtual formula of excommunication, exclusion from God's people. In Simon's instance the words may imply more a statement of nonmembership. His behavior betrayed that he had no real portion in God's people. Luke spoke of Simon's not having a share "in this ministry." The word translated "ministry" is *logos*, a word used throughout Acts for the gospel (cf. [8:4](#)). Simon had not responded to the gospel; he had responded to greed. He lacked the contrition and inner conviction that accompany a true response to the gospel. His heart was "not right before God." Peter did not merely pronounce a curse on Simon. He offered him the chance to repent (v. [22](#)). God can forgive even such a thought as Simon's greedy desire to manipulate the divine Spirit. Apart from his repentance, Simon's state would remain one filled with the "gall of bitterness" and captivity to the "bonds of sin" (v. [23](#)).

**8:24** The question is whether Simon did in fact repent. His response (v. [24](#)) may express a degree of remorse but scarcely the sort of complete turnabout of will and mind that marks true repentance. In fact, Simon expressed no repentance. Instead, he asked the apostles to intercede for him. There was no prayer of contrition from Simon, just the fear that Peter's predicted judgment might come down upon him.

Luke gave no further information on Simon the magician. He remains a shadowy figure. Luke, however, made his point. Christianity has nothing to do with magic; magic is powerless before the genuine power of the Holy Spirit. God's Spirit can neither be manipulated nor bought. Simon illustrated that. A proper response to God's gift of salvation is much more than simply a "what-is-in-it-for-us?" approach. It involves genuine commitment in response to the work of God's Spirit.

CONCLUSION TO THE SAMARITAN NARRATIVE ([8:25](#)).

**8:25** Verse [25](#) is a transitional verse. The reference to the apostles "preaching the gospel" forms an "inclusion" with the identical words in v. [4](#), thus rounding off the narrative (the inclusion is not readily apparent in the NIV as it is in the Greek text). The reference to the apostles evangelizing the Samaritan villages is significant. Not only did they endorse the Samaritan mission, but they also enthusiastically participated in it. A new stage in the Christian mission had been reached—the witness to Samaria. Begun by the Hellenist Philip, it was embraced by the entire church. The "they" of v. [25](#) is ambiguous. It certainly refers to Peter and John but may include Philip as well. If so, Philip would have been returning to Jerusalem and would have been set for his call still further south to encounter the Ethiopian eunuch.