

May 19, 2024

God's Good News Story: The Church Alive & Growing

The Book of Acts Pt 11 - Acts 8:1-40

Four Portraits of the Early Church

Our theme for 2024 is God's Good News Story, Continued... ***"The Church Alive & Growing"***. For the past few months, we have been looking at the basic descriptions and the **true call & purpose of the Church**... ***To be powerful Witnesses of God's Good News Story, motivated by love, empowered by the Holy Spirit.***

Today's passage found in Acts 8, again, gives us a example to follow by the Church of the 1st Century that we can learn from and apply as the Church in the 21st Century era. **If you remember** from previous passages the early church modeled three distinct characteristics:

Continuous Devotion & Worship

Common Care & Concern

Courageous Obedience & Faithfulness

Courageous Obedience & Faithfulness is the focus of today's passage.

As I mentioned before, Luke, is the author and compiler of both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. He is an excellent writer who uses a style that includes Historical Narrative, Apologetics (defense of the faith) and he loves to use personal story events. Luke helps us to get more involved with the story of the growth and the

development of the early church by focusing on individuals and personal accounts.

In Chapter 8 we encounter the personal stories or portraits of 4 individuals (Saul, Phillip, Simon & the Ethiopian Eunuch). We can easily learn what we should **DO** or **BE** (from 2 of them) in a situation and what we should **NOT DO** or **BE** (the other 2) from studying the actions of these 4 people.

(Some of the following is taken from "The Bible Exposition Commentary: Vol. 1 - Acts. By Warren Wiersbe)

Person No. 1 – SAUL – A Zealous Persecutor

Acts 8:1-3... ¹Now Saul approved of putting Stephen to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except for the apostles. ²Some devout men buried Stephen and mourned loudly for him. ³But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house; and he would drag away men and women and put them in prison.

Obviously, Saul is in the **WHAT WE SHOULD NOT DO OR BE** category. If you do not already know this, Saul will later have a vision and encounter with Jesus Christ and be gloriously saved and become one of the greatest missionaries of all times. But, for now, he is a zealous persecutor. The word zealous is not always a negative word as it carries the meaning: "filled with or showing zeal: marked by passionate support for a person, cause, or ideal". (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

So, being zealous is not the negative part, until it is paired with the word PERSECUTOR. Sadly, Jesus and His disciples and the early church were constantly under the threat of persecution. Satan does not want the Kingdom of God and His Church to grow. Thus, he is always seeking to stir up trouble.

Saul was unknowingly doing the work of Satan, but mistakenly thinking he was serving God. Being passionate or zealous about something can be a great thing, but it can also be a terrible thing. The key issue is WHAT are you passionate or zealous about!

Saul was blinded by his traditions and obsessive commitment to Jewish law and practices. He seemed to be so obsessed with his relationship to the law that he forgot the key is to have a relationship with the Law-Giver...God, and His Son, the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

Today we can see this with people from all faith backgrounds who have a zealous religious commitment, but not a zealous relationship commitment to the True God.

Let me ask you, are you just Religious or are you in a personal dynamic relationship with God through Jesus?

Person No. 2 – Phillip – A Faithful Preacher

Acts 8: 4-8...⁴ Therefore, those who had been scattered went through places preaching the word. ⁵ Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming the Christ to them. ⁶ The crowds were paying attention with one mind to what was being said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. ⁷ 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 or limped on crutches were healed. ⁸ So there was much rejoicing in that city.

Warren Wiersbe states “Persecution does to the church what wind does to seed: it scatters it and produces a greater harvest” (p. 434)

I am sure that you can guess that Phillip is one of the Good Guys, one we should **BE** like and **ACT** like! Phillip was one of the Seven (7) men of faith and godly character that were set apart to care for the needs of the widows in Acts 6. He along with Stephen, another of the Seven (7) were also extremely gifted and zealous about preaching and sharing the Gospel. This zealousness for the Good News got Stephen sadly killed. Phillip was not deterred by this danger and began his own evangelistic efforts and miracle working. Thankfully, he did not have the same deadly end that Stephen had. Phillip was amazingly successful as a faithful and powerful preacher and miracle worker. Phillip ‘scattered’ the seeds of the Good News Story into the area known as Samaria....

The people in this area were looked down upon by the Jewish people as a mixed-race lower-class people. But Phillip was faithful and lived up to the goal to 'Be Like Jesus'. If you remember Jesus preached and taught in the region of Samaria. Phillip was faithful in bringing the Good News to all people, just as Jesus commanded us to.

Person No. 3 – Simon the Sorcerer: A Clever Deceiver

You can probably deduce that this fellow is one of the ones NOT to Be Like!

Acts 8:9-25...⁹ *Now a man named Simon had previously been practicing magic in the city and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great;*¹⁰ *and all the people, from small to great, were paying attention to him, saying, "This man is the Power of God that is called Great."*¹¹ *And they were paying attention to him because for a long time he had astounded them with his magic arts.*¹² *But when they believed Philip as he was preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were being baptized.*¹³ *Now even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip, and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was repeatedly amazed.*¹⁴ *Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John,*¹⁵ *who came down and prayed for them that they would receive the Holy Spirit.*¹⁶ *(For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of*

*the Lord Jesus.)*¹⁷ *Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit.*¹⁸ *Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money,*¹⁹ *saying, "Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."*²⁰ *But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could acquire the gift of God with money!"*²¹ *You have no part or share in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.*²² *Therefore, repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart will be forgiven you.*²³ *For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of unrighteousness."*²⁴ *But Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."*²⁵ *So, when they had solemnly testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they started back to Jerusalem, and were preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.*

It is obvious that whenever God moves mightily and the Church is growing, that Satan will try his best to produce distractions and counterfeits. Simon a sorcerer or magician is the tool Satan was using in this region. Simon was able through a combination of trickery, sleight of hand, magic and I would suppose some Satanic power to astound and bewitch the people and leaders of this area. He would be a major headliner in a Vegas show if he were around today!

Simon is a little like the man Gamaliel, in our message a few weeks ago, where Gamaliel suggested to leave Peter and the others alone as they were probably going to fade away. Gamaliel seemed to have a mixed bag of concern, wisdom, political savvy, and lack of moral backbone. We see in Simon a similar confusion and uncertainty of his true motives and beliefs. He was obviously a Clever Deceiver by nature, but the scripture says that he was enthralled by the actions of Phillip and his preaching and miracle working, which he must have at least partially thought was a better form of the ‘magic’ he was engaged in. But the scripture says in vs. 13... ***Now even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip, and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was repeatedly amazed.***

So, it appears that Simon ‘***believed and was baptized***’ by Phillip and began to follow them. But his old nature reared its deceptive head. When the Apostles in Jerusalem heard of the great movement of God in Samaria, they sent Peter and John to verify the work and to ‘***lay hands of them to receive the Holy Spirit***’. When Simon saw that the Holy Spirit was given by laying on of hands his old nature and a lack of theological teaching, he offered money to Peter and John to purchase, in a sense, the “***rights to the Holy Spirit***” so he could do the same. Peter was infuriated by Simon’s request and cursed his intents and proclaimed that he would perish with his money if he didn’t repent and ask forgiveness. Simon pleaded for forgiveness of his ignorance and deception. We don’t have a report as to what happened to Simon, but we can hope that he learned his lesson and no longer let his old nature of deception and personal gain get in the way of his obedience to God.

Lastly, we look into...

Person No. 4 – The Ethiopian Eunuch: A Genuine Seeker

You can probably guess that this is the other person we are to be like!

The Ethiopian Eunuch is an interesting but rather mysterious fellow. He is described as an Ethiopian Eunuch from the court of Candace (or Kandake) Queen of the Ethiopians. In the times of the Bible this land is most often agreed upon that it is not what we call modern day Ethiopia, but the land of Kush or Cush, which corresponds closer to modern day Sudan south of Egypt. The word *ethiopian* is generally consider to be a taken from the “Greek word *Aithiopia* (“Ethiopia”) and *Aithiops* (“Ethiopian” in Acts 8:27) is “scorched, or burnt, face.” These words can be used generally for the lands and the people of “black Africa.” In Acts 8:27, however, “Ethiopian” refers to a person from the Kushite nation which was immediately south of Egypt”. <https://margmowczko.com/queen-candace-of-the-ethiopians/>

There is great debate whether he was a Jew, a Gentile proselyte or something else. But that is not really the point. The point is that this man was a GENUINE SEEKER of God. He sought truth and came a long way to find it.

Let’s read what is said about this court official.

Acts 8:26-40... ²⁶ *But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, “Get ready and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a desert road.)* ²⁷ *So he got ready and went; and there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship,* ²⁸ *and he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading Isaiah the prophet.* ²⁹ *Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go up and join this chariot.”* ³⁰ *Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, “Do you understand what you are reading?”* ³¹ *And he said, “Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?”* *And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.* ³² *Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this: “HE WAS LED LIKE A SHEEP TO SLAUGHTER; AND LIKE A LAMB THAT IS SILENT BEFORE ITS SHEARER, SO HE DOES NOT OPEN HIS MOUTH.* ³³ *IN HUMILIATION HIS JUSTICE WAS TAKEN AWAY; WHO WILL DESCRIBE HIS GENERATION? FOR HIS LIFE IS TAKEN AWAY FROM THE EARTH.”*

³⁴ *The eunuch answered Philip and said, “Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself, or of someone else?”* ³⁵ *Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him.* ³⁶ *As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?”* ³⁷ *And Philip said, If you believe with all your heart, you may. And he*

answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. ³⁸ *And he ordered that the chariot stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him.* ³⁹ *When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him but went on his way rejoicing.* ⁴⁰ *But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through, he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities, until he came to Caesarea.*

The Ethiopian was a man who had a genuine desire to seek and know God and His ways. What a great testimony and legacy of memory he leaves. We can guess that he was very famous and influential in his native land, but history records him as a man who *GENUINELY SOUGHT* after God and found Him. I personally believe that we can also deduce from this passage that if someone truly is intent on knowing God and truth, that God will provide a way for them to come to know Him and believe.

We find God directly intervening three times in this event involving Phillip and this Ethiopian.

1st - In verse 26 we find an Angel spoke to Phillip and gave him instructions to go south on the road to Gaza. Here he encounters the Ethiopian reading from the Old Testament book of Isaiah 53:7,8.

2nd – The Spirit speaks to Phillip to come alongside the chariot the Ethiopian is riding in and hears him reading the scripture....

Phillip asks him if he understands, and the man says no, how can I unless someone guides me. By the way, this is an important concept, people need to have Jesus' followers come and share the truth if they are going to be able to believe. Sharing the Good News Story is our responsibility and privilege.

Phillip then follows the 'Be Like Peter', 'Be Like Stephen' and 'Be Like Jesus' preaching and witnessing model. He started with the Biblical text and showed the truth about Jesus to him. That's another key concept in sharing the Good News Story.... We need to know and use the Bible as the core element in showing truth about God. The Ethiopian believed and requested to be baptized, this again is another key concept of the Good News Story, baptism is a vital act of obedience and identification. Another point to take note of that this man was also described as a Eunuch, the means that he was not allowed under Mosaic and Jewish law to even enter the temple because of his mutilated body. But, in Christ we see that all people, healthy, well or not healthy and well are loved, accepted and sought after by God.

3rd – A third time we see that the Holy Spirit then takes Phillip away to a town about 20-30 miles north to a coastal town of Azotus and then keeps preaching until he arrived in Caesaria. As a side note, he seems to have had a long-term ministry in Caesaria as we will find him 20 years later still there faithfully teaching and discipling believers as found in Acts 21:8.

Well, today we have looked into the portraits of four early church individuals.

SAUL: A Zealous Persecutor

PHILLIP: A Faithful Preacher

SIMON THE SORCERER: A Clever Deceiver

ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH: A Genuine Seeker

My hope is that we can learn from these four what to **BE** like and what **NOT** to **BE** like. We can learn from others correct choices as well as their wrong choices. So, what will you take away from these portrait encounters?

I suggest this take-away, remembering the past portraits and encounters from the Book of Acts...

Our Take-Away For Today:

Be Like Barnabas

Be Like Peter

Be Like Stephen

Be Like The Ethiopian

Be Like Phillip

Most of All

BE LIKE CHRIST