

BaptistWay Bible Series for April 1: Reaching beyond the comfort zone

March 20, 2007

Posted: 3/20/07

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Reaching beyond the comfort zone

- Acts 8:4-8, 14-17, 26-36

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Baptist Standard, Dallas

The late Curtis Vaughn, the brilliant New Testament scholar, was my teacher for Greek in seminary. In class, a student quizzed him about the characteristics of a New Testament church. Vaughn answered, "If you want to have a New Testament church then sell all of your buildings, meet in homes, and do away with the professional ministry." The entire class chuckled as if to say, "That's a novel idea, but who would want to do that?"



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God has more sense than all of us and already knew the complications of the tabernacle and temple as objects of worship and the complicity of a professional ministry that gives opportunity for jealousies, arrogance, competition, pride, selfishness, ambition, moral failure and conflict. Both pastors and laypeople need to chew on that one for many different reasons. Keep this in mind as we tackle our assignment as the apostles and believers move outside their comfort zones and adopt a new and natural strategy.

Stephen's sermon in Acts 7 not only exposes a deepening insight into Pentecost but also an explanation of what happens in Acts 8. The sermon was perfect for the moment, proved his grasp of the history of the people of God, and moved to a conclusion that has pulsating, profound ecclesiological and spiritual ramifications.

Acts 7:44-48 contains the practical, powerful truth of Pentecost, the fulfillment of Acts 1:8, that releases God from the casket of the law, the tabernacle and temple. Read the verses and capture the impact expressed by Stephen that "... the Most High does not live in houses made by men" (v. 48). In other words, get God out of the four walls and into the world of sinners and unbelievers.

Stephen understood the message at Pentecost and was hated for what he preached. Stephen boldly said: "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit" (v. 52). Notice the counterpart, "But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit ..." (v. 55).

Now consider this question, "Have Baptists become stiff-necked people who resist the Spirit of God?" Christians mouth the Great Commission but worship God as though he lives only in the church sanctuary.

The expectation is that if anyone gets saved they will have to come to church, like what the church likes, dress like the church dresses, smell like

the church smells, hear what the church hears—and if they don't like it or feel welcomed, then it is their tough luck. Hell is for those who do not like what the church likes and who do not come to where the congregation meets. If the preacher wants to hold their hand, good for him. That is what he is paid to do.

The circumstances and times are somewhat different, but the resistance to the Spirit and the worship of God is about the same as it was before Pentecost.

Stephen preached his message and was killed, becoming the first Christian martyr, while Paul stood by, receiving the clothing of the “witnesses,” who cast the first stone as required by Mosaic law (v. 58). The Spirit moved Stephen to tell the truth regardless of the cost, confront the old structures of the temple paradigm, face the lions of Zion and shove verbal rocks into their blind minds.

When Stephen was martyred by stoning, his death motivated the first and greatest missionary movement in the history of the world. The Spirit of God no longer would be contained in the walls of the church but poured out into the streets of Jerusalem. It goaded the new believers into the highways and hedges, into the streets and homes, to other people groups, and into the widening circle of Judea and Samaria and the ends of the earth.

Remember that Stephen was “just a layman” (servant, deacon). Others “had been scattered” and “preached the word wherever they went” (Acts 8:4). Stiff-necked people love to study these passages and go home after church and take a nap (the preferred Baptist hour of power). The most genuine evidence of the filling of the Spirit is the individual and congregational witness of their faith. The Spirit moves the followers of Christ out of their comfort zones to face a hostile, mocking, sinful world.

Preaching to spiteful neighbors (Acts 8:4-8)

I had a new adult Christian say to me recently, “Now that I am a Christian, I see people differently.” These new Christians looked at the Samaritans, typically hated by the Jews, and saw them as people for whom Christ died and part of the universal plan of salvation. The Samaritans were religious and were much like the Jews in worship and practice of the law. They, too, needed freedom in Christ.

With the Jewish leaders on the attack against the church, assumed to be led by Saul, the dispersion of the believers began as they scattered to protect themselves (8:1). Two words are used for preaching in Acts 8:4-5; one meaning to proclaim as a herald (*kerusso*) and the other to proclaim the good news (*euaggelizo*). Under duress and a storm of persecution (v. 1), the Holy Spirit gave them courage and boldness to keep on preaching throughout Judea and into Samaria.

Phillip, one of the apostles and not to be confused with Phillip, the evangelist, (Acts 21:8) is singled out for his success in preaching to the Samaritans, people with whom the Jews had spiteful and limited contact. Phillip is a Hellenist, a Greek-speaking, foreign-born Jew, and would have a more open mind to other peoples and cultures. Phillip was plowing new ground, seeing new vistas and opening new doors of opportunity. With the Lord in control of his life, he had a different worldview, and it came to him through the guidance of the Spirit of God.

Luke is careful to show the fulfillment of the words of Christ in Acts 1:8 and the impact that the filling of the Holy Spirit had upon these new believers who would share the gospel with anyone. Seeing the success of the gospel preached in Jerusalem, experiencing the blessedness of a common fellowship (*koinonia*), observing how the church loved and cared for one another, Philip wanted others to be so blessed, even those he had previously despised. Phillip saw that God accepted Samaritans as well as

Jews. The Jews could never convince the Samaritans to merge, but the Holy Spirit could bring them together at the foot of the cross. The Samaritan revival began (vv. 6-8).

Preaching to Satan's sorcerer (Acts 8:14-17)

In this Samaritan city lived a man by the name of Simon, a sorcerer who "boasted that he was someone great" (v. 9). Perhaps, Simon considered himself the messiah of the world and would set himself up as a divine emanation and would use money to buy himself prestige.

A sorcerer was one who believed he could use the power of Satan to his advantage. Simon was a kind of witch doctor who made his living by deceiving people and selling his craft. He created great excitement and the people were amazed at him because he could perform magic tricks (v. 11). Simon listened and, along with many others, became a believer and "was baptized" (v. 13).

Simon was amazed at the "signs and miracles" of Phillip. Simon thought he was a quack. Simon is not unlike many people from generation to generation who are charlatans, who become enamored with Satan's ways and powers and pretend to have them as well.

The gospel is for them, also. The apostle, Phillip, did not hesitate to preach with Simon in the crowd. He knew the Holy Spirit was powerful enough to bring conviction and repentance. There was no fear of the bewitching Simon or the consequences of his wizardry. God could change the heart of Satan's friends with the miracle of new birth.

This passage is a curious paragraph and difficult to understand. Apparently, the apostles in Jerusalem were so enthused about the Samaritan revival they sent their best leaders, Peter and John, down to

assist (v. 14).

Perhaps, they were sent down to resolve the issue which they found—faith and baptism in the name of Jesus but no Holy Spirit (v. 16). The 120 gathered in Jerusalem were believers, but they had not the power of the Holy Spirit until Pentecost. The Holy Spirit was promised and the miracle of Pentecost had occurred without the laying on of hands.

The supposition was that anyone who believed received the gift of the powerful Spirit of God. Peter and John “prayed,” interceded in their behalf and “placed their hands on them” (vv. 15-16) “and they received the Holy Spirit” (v. 17, see also Acts 19:1-7).

There is much here that cannot be explained. For our purposes, it is enough to say that we should not categorize how the Spirit comes upon us, for the Spirit comes as he wills and will not be limited to human understanding. Clearly, the apostles expected every believer to possess or be possessed by the Spirit of God.

Simon’s affirmation of Phillip’s message and baptism was not sufficient for genuine faith, probably an intellectual decision only. Acts 8:18-24 explains Simon’s mistake of trying to buy the Holy Spirit with money and Peter called for him to “repent of this wickedness” (v. 22). The story of Simon, the sorcerer, may be included to show us that true believers will receive the Spirit of God as a gift and man must not be tempted to perpetuate the Spirit of God any other way. The Spirit of God will not be used or exploited to anyone’s advantage, and especially those who use the Spirit to make money, a problem even today.

Preaching to internationals (Acts 8:26-36)

Peter and John go back to Jerusalem while Phillip responds to God’s

direction and goes south to Gaza (v. 27) where he meets the African man from Ethiopia. This man represents the extension of the gospel to the “ends of the earth.” Phillip, undeterred, preached in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and extended his proclamation internationally.

The circle gets wider and wider. Phillip was a local evangelist who preached in town and state, in Samaria to despised half-breeds as a home missionary, and to a black man from Ethiopia as an international missionary. The gospel was for every race, people, country and nation of the world. The Jewish mindset had been changed by Christ to include anyone of any race.

There are many facets to this very human story of the eunuch who believed, but our interest is in the movement of national and international appeal. I do not consider him a Jew born in Ethiopia but actually a native son of Africa, a black man. He had been in Jerusalem and was on his way back home, interested but ignorant of the Scripture and of Christ. The Scripture and the Spirit prepared the Ethiopian to hear and receive the truth that Phillip taught. That is the heart of the mission strategy. He believed, was baptized immediately and “went on his way rejoicing” (v. 39).

In 1983, I went from Waxahachie to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on a partnership mission trip. At the Gloria Hotel in Rio, I witnessed to my waiter who stood at the table and bowed his head to receive Christ. The waiter was a black man, from Africa, a practitioner of witchcraft, who had come to Brazil to seek a better life. We both went on our ways rejoicing at the power of the Spirit of God.

The missional church seeks to be empowered by the Spirit of God and to move out of convenient comfort zones to take the gospel to every mission opportunity possible.

Discussion question

- Who are the people beyond your church's comfort zone whom God is calling your church to reach toward?

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Baptist churches, in Texas, the BGCT, the nation and around the world.