

Last week we focused on the story of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Stephen chose death rather than compromising his Christian faith. In the power of the Holy Spirit he made a courageous stand, and in doing so he resisted the temptation to give in or give up. Stephen took a stand, and so must we. Stephen resisted, and so must we. Today we will focus on the God-given power we have to resist everything other than God and his gracious love.

In Romans 12:2 Paul challenges us to not be conformed to the patterns of this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds as the Holy Spirit transforms us into the likeness of Jesus. Much of the pattern of this world is anti-God, and must be resisted if we are to please him. In today's story of the church's expansion beyond Jerusalem I want to name four points of resistance to the patterns of our world. In all of this we have the power of the Holy Spirit to strengthen us.

Let's jump in.

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. (Acts 8:1, 4)

After his resurrection and before his ascension Jesus promises the Holy Spirit to his disciples, and with it, the power to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria and to the ends of the world. This promise is the key to understanding the whole of the book of Acts.

Acts 2-7 is deals exclusively on the Christian Church in Jerusalem.

Acts 8 explodes with the mission to Samaria and Judea.

And in Acts 9-28 the focus is the mission to the ends of the world – to the broader Roman population.

In Acts 8, as important as the Jerusalem church will continue to be, the city begins to disappear into the rear view mirror.

Saul leads a brutal and sadistic persecution against the church. His objective is clear – he and those he leads seek nothing other than the complete destruction of the Christian community.

But rather than destroy the church, persecution expands it. Persecution to the church was like petrol on a fire.

Stephen's death led to a great persecution which in turn led to a dispersion of the believers which in turn led to an amazing season of evangelism.

Jesus' prophecy that the church would spread from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria was not fulfilled through a wonderful ministry model, a great strategy, a dynamic personality or a triumphant church.

Jesus prophecy was fulfilled through persecution and fueled by the Holy Spirit.

Our God full of surprises. The same God who demonstrated his gracious love through a barbaric instrument of torture also grows the church through the pressure and pain of persecution.

Persecution often is a precursor to church expansion. Jim Edson and David and Helen Morris recently returned from China. In 1949, after almost 150 years of mission there were approximately 500,000 Protestant Christians in China. With the Communists taking over the country, Christianity was actively discouraged and all Western missionaries left the country. The so-called underground Chinese church was born. During the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976 Christianity was completely banned. But after 60 years of persecution that included the imprisonment, torture and even execution of hundreds and thousands of Christian leaders, the church has grown to be somewhere between 50 and 100 million strong. Wow!

One prominent leader of the House Church movement in China, Pastor Samuel Lamb, has said that Persecution is good for the church; more persecution – more growth. He has been imprisoned on various occasions for a total of 20 years. Every time he has been in prison the church he leads has grown. He cheekily says to the Chinese authorities; 'Send me back to prison!'

Persecution does not stop proclamation; more often than not it fuels it.

But we have to be careful. Persecution often fuels church growth, but not always. In countries like Albania and Iran, where a rich Christian heritage existed, persecution has threatened the church to its core. We should always be praying and agitating for our Christian brothers and sisters who find themselves suffering for their faith.

The other critical thing to note about this verse is that it was not the big names that were dispersed and subsequently preached the gospel. Peter and James and John and the rest of the apostles stayed in Jerusalem, it was the no-name Christians that were scattered and who then boldly preached. It was the 'no name' Christians through who God demonstrates his miraculous power and through who God reaps a wonderful harvest.

There is a temptation that the work of evangelism – of telling other about Jesus – is someone else's job. Whilst we are not all evangelists – gifted to speak publicly to crowds about Christianity - all of us who say we follow Jesus are called to do the work of evangelism.

Peter tells us:

'Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.' (1 Peter 3:15)

The disciples who were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria did not stay mute. In the power of the Holy Spirit they preached the gospel at every opportunity.

When it comes to Jesus, Christians do not shut up; they speak up!

And so, in the power of the Holy Spirit we must resist the temptation to embrace Quiet Christianity.

There is no such thing.

I've shared the story of a friend of mine from Bible College. Years before he had been a policeman –a detective. Through his own bad choices he was convicted of various crimes and imprisoned. He lost his freedom, his family and most of his friends. Because he was now an ex-policeman he was held in protective custody in prison. Through the ministry of a prison chaplain, he encountered Jesus. His life was completely transformed. In the most unlikely of circumstances he was overwhelmed by joy and peace and a sense of purpose. Immediately after his conversion he began to anyone who would listen about his new found faith – prison warders and fellow prisoners alike.

He related a story to us of a day where he was in an intense conversation about Jesus with another prisoner. The conversation was interrupted by the alarm that signaled lock down for the night where every prisoner had to go back to their own cell. Once he got back to his cell, he said that he continued their conversation on the prison telephone. Prison telephone? Are prison cells like hotel rooms? Not at all. When prisoners wanted to talk with one another from their cells, they would scoop the water out of the bottom of the metal toilet bowls in each cell had, place their head in the bowl and speak to each other through the plumbing. My friend shared Jesus, prayed with fellow prisoners and led some to faith in Jesus with his head stuck down a toilet bowl.

Even in difficult circumstances – especially in such circumstances – followers of Jesus never shut up, they always speak up.

So here is the challenge. If a friend or neighbor asked you why you go to church every Sunday, who you bother with all that Jesus stuff, how would you respond? What words, phrases, images and stories would you use? What in your story of faith would speak to them? And if you can't think of a situation where you would be likely to be asked that question – then ask yourself this question – Why not?

Lets' read on.

Phillip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. When the crowd heard Phillip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. So there was great joy in that city. (Acts 8:7-8)

Like Stephen, Phillip was one of the seven deacons chosen by the apostles to serve the church. He finds himself in an unnamed city of Samaria where he promptly preaches the gospel.

For the Jews of Galilee and Judea the people of Samaria were hybrids in race and religion. They were seen as heretics and schismatic. Samaritans were seen as racially impure, religiously heretical and politically treacherous. For Jews to eat with a Samaritan was synonymous with eating pork. Samaritan women were seen as unclean.

Phillip the Jew finds himself in Samaria and preaches the gospel. He performs signs and wonders – people are healed and demons are cast out of people.

As we have already seen, and will continue to see, wherever the gospel is proclaimed there is an inevitable clash of kingdoms. Sparks fly. Evil is pushed back. Often demons shriek and wail. Signs and wonders are performed.

Signs and wonders are a vivid demonstration of the gospels' power. They point to the truth and power of the good news of Jesus which Phillip proclaims. As Phillip preaches the Samaritans listen intently because they have seen with their own eyes miracles that demand an explanation.

There are two things to say. First signs and wonders like exorcisms and healings are not ends in themselves but point to a much deeper and more profound reality. Miracles like these point to the truth and power of the gospel. Miracles breaks down walls of resistance people have towards God and his message. But the message is always more important than the miracles.

CS Lewis puts miracles in their proper perspective when he said this:

Miracles are a retelling in small letters of the very same story which is written across the whole world in letters too large for some of us to see.

The capital M miracle of our world is this; God loves us even as we turn our back on Him, with that love extending to a blood soaked cross and an empty tomb. Little 'm' miracles point to this big 'M' Miracle of Miracles.

But we live in a world of scientific rationalism where we are told that something can't be real unless it can be explained or measured. In such a world miracles are just a delusion of the mind, a trick of the senses or worse, a cruel joke perpetuated by charlatans posing as faith healers. But the witness of the scriptures is that God, the Creator of all that is including the laws which given our universe, as Creator is not bound or constrained by those laws.

We worship a God who formed humanity out of the dust; who in Abraham and Sarah birthed a nation out of two geriatric pensioners; who spoke to Moses from a burning bush and delivered thousands of Israelites from Egypt's grip through a wall of water.

We serve a Lord who turned water into wine and a few fish and some bread into a feast for 5000; a Lord who spat on a blind man's eyes and he saw; who commanded, and then saw the lame walk; who healed lepers so they danced with joy and whose authority commanded dead men to rise.

We worship a miracle working God. And so we must resist the blind rationalism of our age that attempts to reduce God and his ways to easy explanations.

Let's keep going.

Luke tells us about a man in Samaria, who was a sorcerer. He practiced all sorts of magic. He was famous and because of this power was worshipped by the people like a god.

But when Phillip arrives performing miracles and preaching the gospel a cosmic shift occurs in both the people and it appears Simon.

When (the people) believed Phillip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Phillip everywhere, astonished by the great miracles and signs he saw. (Acts 8:12-13)

The magic of Simon was all for his glory and name.

The miracles of Phillip were for God's glory and God's name.

The Samaritans are not just enraptured by Phillip's miracles; they are captured by the good news of the gospel and so profess faith and are baptized, as does Simon.

But if we read carefully Luke's words we can already see some ambiguity in Simon's faith. Whereas the people believed Phillip's preaching of the good news of the kingdom of God, Simon just believes. It seems Simon is obsessed with Phillip's ability to perform signs and wonders. He follows Phillip everywhere. It is a complete role reversal. Before Phillip arrived, the Samaritans followed Simon – now Simon follows Phillip.

Simon loves the razzle-dazzle. He seems more impressed by the spectacular than by the spiritual.

Let's continue.

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. (Acts 8:14)

Word gets back to Jerusalem that revival has broken out in Samaria and John and Peter, the two most 'senior' leaders of the church are promptly dispatched. Why do they make the journey? The most likely reason is that knowing the enmity that existed between the Jews and Samaritans, Peter and John knew that their very public affirmation of Phillip's ministry would nip in the bud any sense that the gospel was only for Jews and not for the Samaritans. The words of Jesus' prophecy were ringing in their ears – you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the world.

The great irony of John's journey to Samaria is that during Jesus' ministry he was the one who pleaded with Jesus to call down fire from heaven to destroy a Samaritan village because they refused to offer hospitality to Jesus and the disciples.

We continue.

When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John place their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. (Acts 8:15-17)

This is one of the most contentious and disputed passages in Acts and indeed in the entire Bible. These verses raise a host of questions.

How could the Samaritans believe and be baptized and not receive the Holy Spirit? After all Jesus himself said that no one can be born again except by the Spirit.

Were the Samaritans Christians before Peter and John laid hands on them, or only after?

On this question, the evidence seems to point pretty clearly to the Samaritans having real and saving faith before the apostles arrived from Jerusalem. Nothing suggests otherwise.

This passage has been used as the basis of doctrinal beliefs of Roman Catholics and Pentecostals that Spirit baptism is a second and subsequent blessing to that of faith blessing. Roman Catholics believe that the Spirit is conferred on a believer when the bishop lays hands on them at the time of their confirmation. And based primarily on this passage, many Pentecostal denominations like the Assemblies of God believe that Baptism in the Holy Spirit is a subsequent blessing to coming to faith in Jesus.

Now I love my Pentecostal and Roman Catholic brothers and sisters. I just thing on this one they are wrong in the way they interpret and use this passage.

All Scripture – from Genesis to Revelation – God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. But we must read scripture with our eyes open to the historical context of what we are reading. For example, the four gospels are written for four distinct audiences to give them a historically reliable portrait of Jesus and his teaching. Paul and Peter’s letters are written to first century churches to teach and admonish them in the way of the gospel – to form Christian maturity and character in them. In Acts, Luke is writing to his friend Theophilus to give him, and now us, an accurate account of the both of the Christian church and the work of the Holy Spirit in its midst. The Acts of the Apostles is primarily an historical account that records the birth of the church.

For a Christian reading the bible is non-negotiable for a growing faith. How we read the bible is just as critical. God moves in different ways through History. God cannot be constrained. God is unpredictable and free.

And so in Acts we have multiple examples of people being baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit. Sometimes it is at the very moment they profess faith in Jesus. Other times, like here, it is sometime afterwards. And still other times, people are filled with the Holy Spirit even before they are baptized. One of my favorite New Testament scholars, Ben Witherington puts it this way:

‘The Spirit comes sometimes with the apostles present, sometimes without; sometimes very close to the time of water baptism, sometimes not; sometimes before water baptism, sometimes after. The point is that God’s gift is in God’s control.’ (Ben Witherington)

The Holy Spirit cannot be controlled. Baptism in the Holy Spirit can’t be reduced to an easy formula.

One of the dangerous temptations of the Christian faith is to reduce dynamic faith to a static formula. And so we have four spiritual laws to explain Christian salvation, we have preachers like me who preach three-point sermons and doctrinal statements that seek to reduce the mysterious complexity that surrounds God and his ways to bite size, digestible chunks.

We must resist the temptation to reduce the wondrous mystery that is God and his interaction with us to prescriptive formulas. God is not neat and tidy.

In God’s sovereignty he withheld the blessing of baptism in the Holy Spirit from the Samaritans until Peter and John arrived from Jerusalem. We can only offer theories as to why. British evangelist Michael Green offers for me a compelling reason for this unusual event:

‘(The delay) is a divine veto on schism in the infant church...as converts from the two sides of the “Samaritan Curtain” found Christ without finding each other. That would have been a denial of the one baptism and all it stood for.’ (Michael Green)

God knew the antipathy between Jews and Samaritans, and knew this suspicion could have spilled over into the fledgling church. But in the church there was to be no Jew nor Greek, Judean or Samaritan, male or female, slave or free – but one faith, one baptism and one Lord. And so the Spirit is withheld for a time so that Samaritan and Jewish Christians could discover Christ’s freedom together.

What does all this mean for us? The critical issue is not how we are baptized in or filled with the Holy Spirit – when we profess faith, or are baptized or at some other time. Most important is being filled with the Holy Spirit. How do we know

whether we are? Simply, are you demonstrating the fruit of the Holy Spirit – like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, self control? Over time, are you becoming more like Jesus?

Let's get back to Simon.

When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying of the apostles' hands, he offered them money and said, 'Give me this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.' Peter answered: 'May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money.' (Acts 8:18-20)

Simon is obsessed with Peter and Phillip and John's powerful ministry. He wants what they have and in an act of feverish desperation offer to buy it. In Simon the Sorcerer's world there is nothing you can't buy, including God's favor.

Peter immediately rebukes Simon and refuses his money. Literally, he tells Simon to go to hell and to take his money with him.

Simon fell for the temptation we all fall for at some time. We think we can buy or earn God's favor. If we give God enough money he will look after us - if we perform enough good works that will earn God's smile. But the gift of grace, including the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in our life, is a free, unmerited, unearned gift out of God's grace.

Peter's rebuke finishes with these words.

You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin. (Acts 8:22-23)

In rebuking Simon, Peter is questioning the very substance of Simon's faith.

Peter tells him his heart is not right before God. Simon has believed, but belief is not enough.

It appears Simon has been impressed with all that he sees and hears, but has he really been converted?

Peter calls him to repent, suggesting that he hasn't truly repented up to this point.

There is a common and dangerous misunderstanding about the Christian faith that says that as long as we believe the right things about Jesus – that he was the Son of God, that he died for our sins, that he rose from the dead – than that is enough for us to be called a Christian.

But while believing the right things is critical, it is only an important first step.

In his public ministry it was demons that recognized Jesus for who he was – the Son of God. James says in his letter:

You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder! (James 2:19)

It is not enough to believe the gospel, as Simon appeared to. It is not enough to know that Jesus is the Son of God. Even demons know and believe that.

The last and most important temptation we must resist is the temptation of Faithless Belief.

As a Pastor the reality of this temptation haunts me. Churches are full of people who hold faithless belief.

They know about Jesus, but they don't know Jesus.

They attend church, but have not allowed God to adopt them into his family.

You've heard me say this before. Going to church for no matter how long does not make you a Christian any more than going to McDonalds makes you a hamburger.

A Christian is simply a person who believes that Jesus is the Son of God and that he died for our sins and rose from the grave conquering sin and death, and based on this belief, places their faith and trust in Jesus as their Lord and Savior. To repent, as Peter commands Simon to do, is to transform our belief into action by handing control of our life to God and God alone.

So I leave you with these questions.

Is your heart right before God?

Do you admire Jesus, or is he your Lord?

Do you believe Jesus, or is he your Savior?