



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Buying In”

Acts 8:1-24

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Imagine being Susan Culbertson. A few weeks ago, we lost our in-house accountant right while we were in the middle of moving from one church software system to another. Who could pick up all the strings when that accountant was the one who knew where all the strings led? We heard that Susan helped Greene Memorial transition to the same software system we are moving to. So, we reached out. Susan agreed to help, jumped right in the middle of our software transition, and is figuring it out. She’s our accounting hero.

Jumping into chapter 8 of the book of Acts feels like that because there are strings leading everywhere. Everything is in transition. We are past the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem when thousands of visiting Jews from around the world hear and believe the Gospel. The Jerusalem Christian community has grown, but now many are fleeing. The original disciples have enough status to be left alone, but many others are being beaten, imprisoned, and even killed. Stephen was just stoned to death.

But the effort to squash the Gospel only accelerates the Gospel’s spread. In what might be called a “Christian Diaspora,” Christian Jews are scattering throughout Judea, Samaria and beyond. Strangely, Jesus’ instructions to the disciples at the beginning of Acts were for them to go into Judea, Samaria and beyond. Only the disciples are staying put in Jerusalem. The only reason the Gospel spreads to Judea, Samaria and beyond is because of the persecution.

The point is, it’s happening. Christian refugees are crossing borders and are sharing what they know of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. And people are believing and being baptized.

Sadly, threats remain. The threats come from outside and from within. As I read the bulk of chapter 8, listen for those threats.



¹ And Saul approved of their killing [Stephen].

That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. ² Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. ³ But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.

⁴ Now those who were scattered went from place to place proclaiming the word. ⁵ Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them. ⁶ The crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did, ⁷ for unclean spirits, crying with loud shrieks, came out of many who were possessed, and many others who were paralyzed or lame were cured. ⁸ So there was great joy in that city.

⁹ Now a certain man named Simon had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he was someone great. ¹⁰ All of them, from the least to the greatest, listened to him eagerly, saying, “**This man is the power of God that is called Great.**” ¹¹ And they listened eagerly to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. ¹² But when they believed Philip, who was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. ¹³ Even Simon himself believed. After being baptized, he stayed constantly with Philip and was amazed when he saw the signs and great miracles that took place.

¹⁴ Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. ¹⁵ The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit ¹⁶ (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). ¹⁷ Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received 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 me also this power so that anyone 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 obtain God’s gift with money!** ²¹ **You have no part or share in this, for your heart is not right before God.** ²² **Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.** ²³ **For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and the chains of wickedness.**” ²⁴ Simon answered, “**Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may happen to me.**”

Chapter 8 wastes no time identifying the outside threat. It is Saul. We learned in chapter 7 that Saul helped with logistics with Stephen’s killing. He watched the coats of those who needed to have their arms free to throw stones. Now at Chapter 8’s beginning, we hear how pleased Saul is that Stephen died. Then we hear that Saul and others conduct house raids at night pulling men and women- and we have to assume children too- from their beds and having them thrown in prison.

Yes, Saul is the outside threat. Remarkably, in these strange chapters of transition, this outside threat later becomes an inside leader. Saul will be on the road to Damascus on another persecution mission when Jesus stops him in his tracks; a spiritual “**We have to talk**” moment that



pulls Saul inside the faith. Saul becomes a Jesus-follower. He starts going by his Roman name, “Paul” so he can use his Roman privileges to take the Gospel to the ends of the known earth. Paul will become the church’s greatest advocate and leading evangelist.

I want you to keep Saul in the back of your mind as an *outside threat* as I tell you about the *inside threat* that is Simon the Magician.

Now that Simon is a magician is not the threat. That’s just a backstory. The backstory is that Simon was amazing with his magic. We are told people called him “Great,” so I’m going to call him “Simon-the-Great.” Simon-the-Great could dazzle the crowd with his wizardry. In the logic of the easily amazed the logic of those who trust the wisdom of entertainment celebrities—they think that someone who can make magical things happen must have magical things to say. Call Simon an *influencer* because people listened to him. And like some popular social media influencers today, Simon monetized his influence and was wealthy.

- Popularity is power.
- Influence is power.
- Money is power.

Simon is a powerful man.

When Philip and other Christians come to the city of Samaria where Simon-the-Great lives they bring a different kind of power and influence with them. The allure of magic is that the gods can be commanded to do what we want them to do. At the heart of the Christian faith is the heart of Jesus’ prayer. Faith is not to get God to do our will, but to bend our will to God’s.

Bending to another’s will sounds like slavery, but faith in this God is liberating. For the desire to do God’s will comes of realizing that it is the will of God to love us, redeem us, save us from our worst selves. That’s what Philip preaches to the Samaritans. He preaches that there is no magic that can make God love us. God already loves us. We can’t magically wish away our sins, but we can live as forgiven people because of God’s grace. No spell to be cast. God demonstrated his love for us in that while we were yet sinners,

Jesus lived with us,
loved us,
died for us,
and now is raised among us;
living with us,
loving us,
guiding us.

This is what Phillip preaches. Somehow God’s Spirit blows through Philip’s preaching and people come to believe this amazing news. They come to know personally divine grace and acceptance. They come to know personally Jesus himself. This knowing, and the self-acceptance that comes with it, is so much more than Simon-the-Great’s magic could ever give them.

Popularity is power, and Simon-the-Great sees power shift from him to Philip. Philip is now the one drawing the crowds. Remarkably, Simon does not then see Philip as his rival. In this



strange chapter of transitions, Simon-the-Magician becomes Simon-the-Christian. After professing his faith and getting baptized, Simon attaches himself to Philip as if he is Philip's right-hand-man. Simon realizes that the next best thing to being "The One" is being "Next to the One."

I guess the question of our passage is Simon's motives. Is his being baptized and attaching himself to Philip just a crass power move or is his conversion in any way authentic?

There does something missing here with Simon. His motivation does not seem to be his need for God, but to be near God. Willie James Jennings says that "[having control over other people and being able to draw a crowd is the closest thing to being with God without God's help.](#)"¹ It is Christianity as

- power without humility,
- influence without grace.

That is the *threat* Simon presents. The problem is that Simon-the-Christian wants what he had as Simon-the-Great and that is power and influence *for their own sake*. Just look what happens when someone more famous and influential than Philip comes on the scene. Peter is an original disciple. He was the right-hand-man of Jesus himself. And when Peter and John preach and lay hands on others, the results are dramatic. The Holy Spirit is powerfully at work. More people than ever ask to be baptized.

Simon *re-attaches*. He now wants to be next to Peter. He *wants it*. He doesn't want what the people want, the grace of God. He wants the power Peter has in bestowing that grace. He wants it and *he's willing to pay for it!* He wants to *literally* buy in.

- Simon is a threat because he draws close to God without needing God's help.
- Simon is a threat because he sees God as an ally and not as a Savior.
- Simon is a threat because the church for him is the means to the same end he had as a magician—to gain power and influence.

Peter sees Simon as a threat and lets him know. He condemns Simon for being an opportunist who doesn't need God except to use God. The only thing that stops what Peter says from sounding like a curse is that he calls for Simon to recognize that he has gone too far and to seek forgiveness.

Is Peter too harsh here? Maybe not. There are people today who use the name of Christ and the endorsement of the church for their own power ends. You may or may not know that the war in Ukraine is being spun within Russia as a Christian cause. A Christian leader, Putin, ordered the invasion. The leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, supports the war because he wants the Ukrainian church brought back into the Russian Church. They need Peter to get in their faces.

¹ Willie James Jennings, *Acts*, a commentary in the Westminster John Knox series called *Belief*." 2017, p. 79.



In our own country, there are some churches that are actively and brazenly aligning themselves with Red or Blue agendas. Ministers are losing their jobs if they don't fall in line, and members are shamed if they don't support the issues in the way political parties define them. Peter needs to get in their faces.

And, drawing on Simon's playbook, there are preachers who get rich with their laying on of hands and magically healing diseases. Peter needs to get in their faces.

I could offer other dramatic examples ranging from Klu Klux Kan members back in the Jim Crow days being assigned churches to join to make sure their leaders do not get out of line... to those tyrants and dictators who justified the worst that they did with Bible in hand and by the authority of the crown that was placed on their heads in church- power seekers who are conveniently religious when it suits their purposes.

Maybe I need to dial the drama down and give less dramatic examples of those who could use some face-time with Peter.

- the one whose relationship with a church is only for the sake of an outside agenda...
- a realtor who joins a church, doesn't get involved, but does offer her services as "a fellow member..."
- the one who wants a prestigious position and expects to have paid for the honor through their giving...

It can feel transactional. It can feel like Jesus is the ally, not the Savior.

But, while I think Simon illustrates how Christians can cross a line, I want to be a bit more gracious toward Simon than Peter is. It may sound unbiblical if I say Peter is too harsh, but to read through Luke and Acts, a good case can be made that he might be.

Throughout Luke's Gospel, we see a bias that the disciples have that Jesus doesn't have- a bias against Samaritans because their culture and faith seem corrupted. Jesus took his message to the Samaritans, but the disciples at times tried to hold him back. And now in Acts, Peter and John, the heads of the Jewish Church have heard about all these Samaritans becoming Christians. They come to support what is going on, but also want to monitor it. They have a "hope-for-the-best-but-fear-the-worst" attitude.

Then again, maybe it really is just me. For people like me, the inside threat is harder to confront than the outside threat of persecutors throwing stones and dragging people from their homes. For years, I was a girls soccer coach. It was easier for me to gather my girls together and point to Kate Norbo on the other team as a threat than it would have been to confront one of my own players for a toxic attitude (I say "would have been" because I was fortunate not to have any players with bad attitudes on that team).

It is even harder than that for me. Are we not all Simon at times? And, honestly, is the need to make connections and the desire to have influence bad? What's wrong with wanting to make connections, to have some influence in making a difference in the world? I once heard a Child Development Expert tell me that the project of young adolescence is to find out what you can do, then find out what you can do well, and then find out what influence you can have over others by



doing it. It's an important way to find out who you are and the difference you can make by being alive. That rings true to me.

There was a lot of Simon in me when I was in my early 20s studying to be a pastor, and then working to be a good one. I wanted to preach sermons that would sway people, I wanted to be able to lead a session to make great decisions, and I wanted to lead a church to do great things.

I was talking about this passage with Andrew Whaley this past Thursday at our minister's bible study and we agreed that there is a certain amount of social capital that comes with being part of a vital church. You make friends within the church, and with those friends comes connections and influence. And because of those connections we get things done. And then Andrew pointed out that Second Presbyterian Church has within its community people who are skilled at planning, fund raising, design, and construction, and it all helped get Alexa House renovated. That's a good thing. It's a good thing that we can draw together resources and do something about improving the quality of life for people in at risk neighborhoods. It is a good thing that we can draw on resources to provide a community for members where many of their personal and interpersonal needs are met. That is what the early church did as well.

What I guess I am saying is that if Peter has a point, it's a point we all need to remember. We can all lose perspective at times and think it is about us. We can all get tricked into believing that this world is going to be saved by some pristine political or social ideology or agenda and the church just needs to fall in line and help. What our passage reminds us is that all we do even in addressing issues and serving others will not solve the world's problems. What it call can be is a witness to God's unconditional love and saving grace. Speaking of weird transitions, it turns out that the more modest the church is about what it can do and the more humble the church is in what it claims, the more powerful a Gospel difference it makes in lives and in the world.

So, I'm going to cut Simon-the-Magician turned Simon-the-Christian some slack. Peter doesn't kick Simon out of the church, he just demands that he do better. And notice that Simon doesn't see that the jig is up and leave the church for another community to do his bidding. No, he sees how he has gone too far and asks Peter to pray for him. Even misguided reasons to be a part of a faith community can transform into good reasons to love God and serve others.

What we are going to do is

- continue to resist being co-opted for other power ends,
- keep making a witness to God's grace with what we say and do without claiming we can save the world,
- and remain gracious with each other and pray for each other when we lose perspective and cross the line.

