

HOPE FOR THE CITY

THE GOSPEL, HOPE, AND THE WORLD

[DR. TIMOTHY KELLER | Sermon transcript, 15 November 2009]

Acts 8:1-8 — And Saul was there, giving approval to his death.

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.

Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. When the crowds heard Philip 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.

Redeemer’s vision, or mission, can be summarized in three words: gospel, city, movement. The *gospel* changes everything; serving in the *city* is the very best way to minister the gospel; and we don’t want to be just a church, just an institution, but a *movement*—a dynamic movement of many churches and ministries throughout the city.

Therefore, this passage is fitting and apt because Acts 8—this case study of Philip the evangelist going into the city of Samaria and doing ministry there—shows us all three things. It shows us what it means to be a movement, what it means to effectively minister in a city, and how to do that by living out the pattern of the gospel in our lives.

A MOVEMENT

We see what it means to be a movement in verses 1 to 4. Verse 1 says, “Saul was there, giving approval to his death.” This is the very end of the story in chapter 7, where we learn about Stephen, who was the first Christian martyr. Stephen was executed, stoned to death, for preaching the gospel. In verse 1 we see that Saul (Saint Paul—later on he would be converted) was there. Perhaps there was something about what he saw in Stephen, that though he was there passively approving, though he didn’t throw any stones, he saw something in Stephen that terrified him, radicalized him, and alarmed him. In any case, we read in verse 3 that after this event Saul began to be the active leader of a persecution. He was trying to destroy the church.

And, as a result, even though verse 1 says the apostles stayed in Jerusalem (they sort of went underground), everyone else—all the lay people—had to flee for their lives, and they were scattered. But the effect of the persecution was actually to strengthen the church—to spread the church, and to spread the gospel—because verse 4 says, “Those who had been scattered [all lay people] preached the word wherever they went.” The word “preached” is not the word you and I think of—we think of somebody publicly speaking to a group. But this word is actually the word “evangelize,” and what we are told is *everybody* evangelized.

Here is what happened. At the church in Jerusalem there was great preaching, and it probably grew because people brought their friends to hear the great preaching. But then the persecution happened, and they were pushed out. We are told that they took what they had learned from their teachers and preachers and they

began to *gossip* the gospel, share the gospel, and counsel their friends with the gospel. They began to evangelize. *Everybody* did. They took what they had and they began to do it themselves.

The church is not supposed to be a body of people with a small number of providers—me, other ministers—and everybody else just coming and being customers. God used the persecution to turn the church into an entire community of providers so everybody was in mission together—absolutely everybody. Everybody was evangelizing—everybody was embodying the gospel, sharing the gospel, teaching the gospel, gossiping the gospel from person to person.

You see this all through the Bible. In Genesis 12, God comes to Abraham and says, “Abraham, I want to bless you. I want to come near to you. I want to bring you in close to me. I want to be intimate with you. I want to give you my love.” Wow! That’s what we want! But then he says in the same sentence, “I want to bless you, that you may be a blessing.”

God never calls you radically *in* without sending you radically *out*. He never calls you in and blesses you and fills your heart with love except to make you to *be* a blessing, to send you out to others (cf. Psalm 67:1–7). That is the reason why he says to Abraham, “I am going to really bless you. Now get out!” Take a look at Genesis 12. God says, “I am going to bless you. I am going to love you—now get out! Get out of Ur. Get out of your country. Get out of your culture. Get out of your comfort zone.” That’s the paradigm.

I want you to see something else. This is what one commentator on the book of Acts says about God using the persecution to send out the people so that everyone became a person in mission: It was not because of some mission plan that was approved and put into action by the leaders of the church that this great expansion happened. It was ordinary believers taking the opportunity to share the message wherever they went. The apostles became “the stabilizing, verifying, and unifying element in a mission that moves to new areas and groups without their planning or control.”¹

Now that is a *movement*. In a bureaucracy, people at the top completely control everything. But in a movement, where everybody owns the mission, everybody is participating, even though you still need leaders. The apostles were “stabilizing, verifying, and unifying”—and yet there was a spontaneity about the church. All kinds of new initiatives bubbled up all over the place. The apostles didn’t *send* Philip to Samaria—he *went*. What happened is God used the persecution to turn his church into a movement, a movement in which everybody is in mission. Everybody is initiating.

That is actually a big part of what God is calling our church to be. By the way, I would say that most of the time—and we are going to talk about this as we go on here—for most churches and Christian communities that get renewed and turned from a kind of fat and happy institution into a dynamic movement in which everybody owns the vision, it usually happens through trouble, through persecution, or through something very bad. It is rare for a community to voluntarily seek it. And this voluntary venture is what we are trying to do at Redeemer over the next ten years. So, first of all, we learn here about being a movement.

MINISTERING IN THE CITY

The second thing we learn here is about the *importance* and the *nature* of city ministry (or urban ministry).

THE IMPORTANCE OF URBAN MINISTRY

Notice that everybody is *scattered*: verse 1, they were scattered; verse 4, they were scattered. That is significant in the Bible, because when the people of God are scattered, or when they are dispersed, urban ministry becomes very important.

1. Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, First Paperback Ed. Vol. 2. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), 2:102.

In the Old Testament, when the Babylonians conquered Judah, what we see is similar to what we have here in Acts 8. The Jews were scattered away from Jerusalem, and they come to a pagan city, Babylon, which was just as filled with people they didn't like as Samaria was. (We will get to why the Jews and the Samaritans didn't get along.) But the Jews—you can read about this in Jeremiah 29—were exiled away from Jerusalem, and they were put into a big, pagan city, Babylon. And then God told them, counterintuitively, to seek the joy of the city. He told the Jews, “I want you to seek the peace and prosperity and *shalom* of Babylon. Pray for it, for if it prospers, you will prosper” (Jeremiah 29:7). Your community will prosper if you pour yourself out in deeds of service and seek the prosperity and the peace of the city where you are.

It's actually common sense. God is saying to us the same thing he said to the Jews: “If you love the city—if you pour yourself out for the city, if you seek the good of the city—how much of a better witness could there be to show the city that your god is God? If you want your community and your faith to grow, then care about the city.”

Urban ministry was crucial when the Jews were exiled, and in the New Testament it becomes crucial to the Christians being scattered. In fact, the whole book of Acts is all about Christians in cities. Do you know that almost everything that happens in the book of Acts happens in a city? The entire early church's history unfolds in cities. Virtually every Christian you meet in the New Testament is a city dweller, and when Paul wanted to reach a province or a nation, he went to the biggest city in that nation and started churches there. Do you know why?

First of all, the *best way to reach the nations is to reach the city*. Some years ago I heard a lecturer say that if Paul really wanted to reach the nations, he could have gone into a particular nation and learned their language and learned their culture (and it is very hard to learn a new language and new culture) and minister there for ten years. And then he could have gone to another nation and learned the culture there and the language there, and ministered for another ten years. And that might have killed him, but if he was still alive, he could have tried it a third time, and learned a third language and a third culture and ministered to a third nation. And by that time, he would be dead.

Or, he could go to a city—go to Antioch, go to Rome—and in every city there are dozens and dozens of ethnic groups and nationalities and people groups, and they are all working in the lingua franca of the city. And then all Paul had to do—and this is what he did—was go to the cities and minister to the cities, and automatically the gospel got into the lifeblood of dozens and dozens of national groups, and it spread to the nations. You go to the city to reach the nations.

Secondly, *you go to the city to reach the culture*. If you go to a village, you might win a lawyer or you might win an artist—but if you go to the city, that is how you have an impact on the art world, and that is how you have an impact on the legal profession. And because Christians were inordinately focused on cities all during the first two or three centuries of their history, by the year 300 A.D. over half the populations of the Greco-Roman cities were Christian, but the countryside was pagan.

In fact, do you know where that word *pagan* comes from? It is a Greek word that means a “man of the country” or a “farmer.” See, the farmers, the people in the country, were pagans, and the people in the cities were Christians. But as the city goes—whatever has captured the city—that is where the culture is going. That is the reason the brutal, old pagan culture was displaced by Christianity, because people went to the cities. Do you see the importance of city ministry?

Let me say this very clearly. The Bible says—Jesus says—to take the gospel to every creature. That means you have to have Christians everywhere there are people. You have to have churches everywhere there are people. Jesus is saying you need Christians in every place, and there is no warrant for saying all Christians have to live in a city.

But I want you to keep something in mind. Over at least the next 150 years, massive numbers of people will be moving into the great cities. For example, 150 years ago in Europe, the rural areas got to their “carrying capacity.” A family had six or seven children or so, and there was no more land, and since only one or two kids could get the farm, people began streaming into the cities to get jobs. As a result, the first great megacities of the world were the European cities. They became huge.

The same thing is happening now in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. What is happening now is the cities of most of the world are growing in size enormously. Somebody has said that basically there is a new Bangkok, as it were, formed every three months. That means eight or nine million people are moving into cities just about every three months.² Over the next 150 years, millions of people are going to be moving into cities, which means in *most* of the world, the cities are growing in size. And in *all* of the world, because of technologies, cities are growing in influence.

Therefore, for at least the next 100, 150, 200 years, most human beings are going to be living in cities, and the church does not know much about ministering in cities. What does that mean? It means we have got to be there. We have got to go there. It means we have got to be good at urban ministry. It is incredibly important.

THE NATURE OF URBAN MINISTRY

We also see in verses 5 to 8 what we need to be effective at urban ministry. There are three marks. Do you know what they are? The three marks of effective ministry are word, deed, and racial reconciliation.

Word ministry

Look at verse 5: “Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there.” That is *word* ministry. The word “proclaim” is what you think of; it is the word for “preach.” It is the word for public proclamation, public teaching of the Bible.

Except notice it says that he preached the *Christ*. He knew what the Bible is about. The Bible is not just about various principles and things you have to believe or do in order to be blessed by God. Oh no! The Bible is about Jesus. It is about Jesus Christ, and how he came to earth to rescue us and to save us by his grace. We see that Philip did not just show up in town and do good deeds. He preached the Word. He called people to repentance. He showed people the life-transforming message of the gospel.

Deed ministry

But the second thing is *deed*. Verse 7 says, “Evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed.” Look at that. People were delivered *spiritually* from interior evil, but, on the other hand, it says paralytics and cripples were healed, which means people were getting help for their *physical* needs. Don’t be distracted by the fact that this is miraculous, because it is not the only way to give people help for their physical needs. In fact, in Acts 4:32–35, you see a place where it says that the early Christian community shared everything they had, so there was no poor person among them.

All of Jerusalem saw the Christians taking care of people in need, helping them with their physical needs, and then it says, as a result, the apostles’ *preaching* was received with great power. It makes perfect sense. It even says so in verse 6: “When the crowds...saw the...signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said.” Or, in short, people will *listen to our words if they see our deeds*. If they see us loving the city—if they see us meeting people’s needs, if they see us caring about the city—they are going to listen to the word. It has got to be word *and* it has got to be deed.

Racial reconciliation

The third mark of dynamic, effective urban ministry is racial reconciliation. You say, “Where does it say anything about racial reconciliation?” That is one of the things that is so remarkable about the entire chapter.

2. See “The Brown Revolution,” *The Economist*, May 9, 2002.

The Samaritans and the Jews utterly hated each other. There was tremendous racial animosity between the Samaritans and the Jews. One of the most amazing passages in the Bible is verse 5, because Philip is so unlike Jonah. *Jonah?* Yes, Jonah.

The book of Jonah is about God calling a Jewish prophet to go and preach to Nineveh, to the Assyrians. There was great racial animosity between the Jews and the Assyrians. They were mortal enemies. God says to Jonah, “I want you to go and preach to your mortal enemies. I want you to call them to repentance.” (See Jonah 1:1–2.) You probably remember one thing about the book of Jonah, but there were actually two things that happened. One thing was Jonah tried to run away. And God had to send a storm, and Jonah is eaten by a fish and regurgitated—the only regurgitated prophet we have! You have probably heard that part of the story, but the part you probably haven’t heard about is Jonah then goes to Nineveh and he preaches to these people that he hates, and unfortunately for him, they repent. He is furious because he wanted to see God “nuke” them. The book ends with him still furious.

Listen, whatever culture you grew up in, whatever people group you grew up in, your people group has taught you to look down on some other people group and say, “Oh *those* people.” God is trying to overcome the Jewish prophet’s antipathy to this other racial group, and at the very end of the book, he is still trying. It just hasn’t worked.

But here is Philip in Acts 8, and he just goes. He is a Jewish evangelist, a Jewish Christian, and he goes to Samaria. No fish. He is not swallowed or regurgitated—he just goes. Why? Do you realize how amazing this is?

The gospel works on the pride of our heart and the inferiority of our heart. My experience of tension between racial groups is there is a combination of superiority and inferiority going on. Until the gospel changes our hearts, we all struggle with inferiority, so what we do is we try to say our culture is superior. Our people are superior, not those people over there. We laugh at those people over there, and that creates this tension.

But what the gospel does is it works on both your superiority and your inferiority. It says you are a sinner, absolutely lost, and you can only be saved by sheer grace. There is nothing you can do about it. That destroys your *superiority*. But it also says the Son of God loved you so much that he was willing to come and give himself for you. That destroys your *inferiority*. And when your superiority is knocked down, and your inferiority is filled in and lifted up, you can reach out.

It is astounding but crucial for the Christian church, especially in cities where there is so much multi-ethnicity, to show the rest of the world how the gospel *does* destroy your superiority and your inferiority, and therefore brings people together who outside in the rest of the world would not be able to be together. The gospel makes people friends who out in the rest of the world would never be friends.

Do you know how it begins? It begins very simply. You have to use the gospel on your heart. You have to look at your own superiority and inferiority, work on it, and then when you come into the church, be aware of the fact that you tend to gravitate to people like yourself. Our default mode is to be just like the world told us to be: “Go after people like you. Hang out with people like you.” You have to catch yourself, and you have to start to reach across the barrier and use the gospel and make friends with a brother or sister who is not like you. That is how it starts. And unless we are able to show the world people getting along in here that can’t get along out there, then we really haven’t applied the gospel to ourselves.

Therefore, the marks of effective urban ministry are word, deed, and racial reconciliation, which change the world because they change the city.

THE PATTERN OF THE GOSPEL IN OUR LIVES

Lastly, the text shows us how to be a movement and how to minister in the city by living out of a pattern of the gospel.

Do you know where the pattern of the gospel is? It is the whole chapter. It is something I only realized recently. Look at all this life and joy in Samaria—urban Samaria. It is amazing. Where did the life and joy come from? The life and the joy of verses 5 to 8 follow the death and the misery of verses 1 to 4.

Look at all the misery in verses 1 to 4. There is death. There is destruction. Verse 2 says, “Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him,” and the word there means “agonizing grief.” There is death, destruction, and agonizing grief, and then in verses 5 to 8, there is life and joy. Misery and death—joy and life. But here is what I want you to see. The joy and life don’t come in spite of the misery and death—they come *through* it. The joy and the life come *because* of the misery and the death. The death has caused resurrection.

How does this work? The pattern here is a gospel pattern. Here is the irony: Saul sought the destruction of the church, and what did it lead to? The expansion of the church. Saul sought to scatter the church, but all it did was to lead to more gathering. He tried to kill it—it led to more life. If you try to put the church to death, it leads to resurrection.

If you go back to chapter 7 and read about Stephen, you see how it happened. When Stephen was put up in front of a kangaroo court, on trial for his life, was he scared? Maybe. But was he angry? Did he lash out at them? Did he call them names? No. We are told that his face was like the face of an angel. He had joy. He had radiance. As they were killing him, he said, “Lord, forgive them. They don’t know what they are doing” (v. 60).

And because he died like that, it electrified the church. In other words, he accepted his suffering; he accepted his death and died nobly. He died faithful to God and faithful to his friends. And, as a result, that particular kind of death led to resurrection. It led to more life. He died that others might live. The Samaritans found new life because he died. Do you see a pattern there?

This pattern has happened constantly in the history of the church—that greater persecution and violence toward Christians and greater oppression and trampling does not *ever* lead to violence in return. It leads to greater love. It leads to greater joy.

The best example of Acts 8 that we have today is actually what happened in China in the twentieth century. After World War II, when the Communist government took over, they threw all the Western missionaries out and they killed a lot of the Chinese pastors. They threw out the Western missionaries and said that was the end of Christianity in China. But do you know what happened? Ironically, it is the very same thing that happened here in Acts 8, because the Chinese church had become too dependent on the Western missionaries. They were the providers, and the churches were the customers; the missionaries brought in the money, and they had their fingers on the controls. But when the Communist government expelled the Western missionaries and began to persecute the church, it turned them all into people of mission. It turned them all into providers. It turned them into people that preached the Word and evangelized everywhere they went. It made the church indigenous, and the church just exploded in growth.

In fact, you see it over and over again. You try to kill the church—you try to persecute the church; you try to stamp it out—but if you use violence on the church, it only makes it grow. And the response is *not* growth in violence; the church doesn’t grow like that. It grows in *love*.

The persecuted Chinese church today (after having grown at least 50-fold over the fifty years after the expulsion of the Western missionaries) is only 5–7% of the population, but when the great earthquakes hit

the Sichuan Province of China in 2008 and 68,000 people died, one million Chinese people volunteered and came and did relief work. And even though the Christians were only 5–7% of the population, probably up to half of all of the volunteers were believers—Christians. Because the more you kill Christians, the more you oppress them—as Tertullian said, “The blood of the martyrs is seed”—the better the church gets. The livelier the church gets. The more death, the more resurrection. The more destruction, the more expansion. The more scattering, the more gathering.

This has been true for two thousand years. Why would that be? How could it be? You know, there are an awful lot of people, groups, and associations that when you start to oppress them, they fight back. They get guns. They shoot you. Why are Christians different?

It is because of the gospel. What is the gospel? The gospel is Jesus. Why was Stephen able to take the condemnation of a kangaroo court with radiance? Why was Stephen able to give his life so that Samaria would live? The answer is because he was literally looking at someone. Just before he died, he says, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” (Acts 7:56) He was looking at someone, who also when he died said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34) He was looking at someone who didn’t just get the wrath of a kangaroo court, but the wrath of cosmic justice on all human evil.

Jesus Christ took all of our punishment for our sins. And Jesus didn’t just die so that Samaria would live—he died that the world would live. And because Stephen was looking at Jesus doing that, he was able to take his suffering with poise. He was able to take it with faithfulness. He was able to take it with joy, and his death led to resurrection.

By the way, Jesus’ death changed Stephen so that he was able to die in order that others may live. That can happen to you, too. Now, I am not suggesting, though it might happen, that you be martyrs. Here is what I am suggesting. It is the principle of the thing.

If you give your finances with radical, promiscuous generosity for the needs of the city—if you give like crazy out of your finances—that is a kind of death. Do you know why? You are dying to all kinds of stuff you could have afforded, all kinds of fun things you could have done if you hadn’t given to others. But if you die—if you experience that death, the death of radical financial generosity—there will be joy in the city. Death will lead to resurrection.

Or, what if you just stick your neck out and say, “I want to identify as a Christian in New York City.” I don’t mean be obnoxious about it. I just mean be willing to let people know you are a Christian. If you do that, there will be some death, oh yes—some people will walk away. Some people might avoid you. You might miss out on a job or get passed over for a promotion. You are experiencing a death, but if you are willing to open up to other people about your faith, that death will lead to life for others. It will lead to resurrection.

If you pour yourself out for others, the way Jesus literally poured his life out for you, it will lead to joy in the city. That is the principle. That is the pattern of the gospel.

His death leads to your life. His death has led to your eternal life, and now, seeing what he has done for you, it will enable you to pour your life out for others, and there will be joy in the city. And if there is joy in the city because you are living out of the pattern of the gospel in your life, it will change the world. Let’s be that kind of movement.

Let’s pray.

Our Father, we thank you that you have given us this vision. You have given us this model. You have given us this pattern and this power. And now we ask that we would realize that, here, as a church. Lord, we ask this not just for Redeemer, but for all the churches of the city, and not just for the churches of New York City but the churches of the cities of the world. Help us to become a movement, to minister effectively in cities out of the gospel—its power and its pattern. We ask this in the name of the one who came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. It is in his name we pray, Amen.

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