

Preaching Christ in a pluralistic world: the message and method of the mission to Samaria in Acts 8

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Abstract

Philip, a Hellenistic Jew, preached the gospel to the Samaritans who were despised by the Jews. The Samaritans were oppressed by evil spirits. They suffered from various kinds of diseases and were in the bondage of Simon the magus. The Samaritans lived in a pluralistic religious community. The confrontation of this community with the gospel produced visible results: people were healed and delivered. Believers were baptized and there was great joy in the city. Transformation took place because Philip preached Christ. This seems to have been the apostolic pattern. The same Christ-centered preaching and communication of the gospel should be followed by ministers of the gospel in today's pluralistic religious world.

1. Introduction

The Christian church started on the day of Pentecost, within a Jewish context. On that day, Peter preached a very strong message to his Jewish audience. The climax of his message was in Acts 2:36: 'Therefore let all the house of Israel know beyond a doubt that God has made this Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Christ.' The focus of the first sermon of the early church was on the person of Jesus Christ. Peter's audience was Jewish people, who knew the Scriptures. It was therefore easy for him to explain what happened based on Old Testament passages that the Jews accepted as God's word. However, it had to be clear in the mind of all those who heard him that Jesus Christ was glorified by God. All the arguments in Peter's message were in support of that fact.

The Jewish leaders did not accept the Jesus–Messiah-centred message of the early church. They responded first by ordering the apostles 'not to speak or

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teach at all in the name of Jesus's (Acts 4:18). Notwithstanding their order, the disciples continued to teach about Jesus. The Jewish leaders therefore 'laid hands on the apostles and put them in a public jail' (Acts 5:18). The disciples responded by telling them that they had no intention to stop speaking about the Christ. This called for a third kind of response from the Jewish leaders: 'They summoned the apostles and had them beaten. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus and released them' (Acts 5:40).

The fourth and final step went beyond speaking, imprisoning, and beating. Stephen was stoned to death (Acts 7:54-60). This caused many disciples to flee from Jerusalem. 'All except the apostles were forced to scatter throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. ... those who had been forced to scatter went around proclaiming the good news of the word' (Acts 8:1, 4).

The enemy of the gospel used these leaders to hinder the furtherance of the message of Christ. Instead of preventing it from spreading, God used their actions to further proclaim the good news beyond Jerusalem. Christ ordered the disciples that they should be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the farthest parts of the earth. The apostles, however, remained in Jerusalem. Christ's intention was for them to go everywhere and preach the good news about Him. The persecution that broke out as a result of the death of Stephen caused the believers to flee from Jerusalem.

When they were scattered they 'went around proclaiming the good news of the word'. Beyond the boundaries of Jerusalem, the church encountered a different audience and different problems. In its first encounter the church met Samaritans and was confronted with the problem of magic (Acts 8). These changes did not take place because the church planned them. Problems with the Hellenistic Jews led to changes within the organization of the church. The church appointed seven helpers; most of them came from a Greek background.² The move to take the gospel to the regions beyond Jerusalem did not come from the church. A persecution led to the spread of the gospel. And, it was a group of people other than the apostles who took the gospel to the regions beyond Jerusalem. In the case of Samaria, it was Philip. It can be argued that those who left Jerusalem due to the persecution were the Hellenistic Jews. Both Stephen and Philip were leaders of the Hellenistic group. It is therefore amazing that God chose a Hellenistic Jew to take the gospel to the Samaritans. The Palestinian Jews despised both the Hellenistic

² They all have Greek names, but were not necessary all Hellenistic Jews. Greek names were common in Jerusalem (Barrett 2004:314-5)

Jews, because of their Greek culture, and the Samaritans, because of their mixed background.

2. The context

The Samaritans had parts of the Old Testament. The Jews considered them to be 'schismatics, heretics or half-breeds' (Maynard-Reid 1997, s.v. Samaria).³ Acts 8 gives us an example of the Christian message in the Samaritan context.⁴ Who were the Samaritans? Even though the Samaritans were not considered Jews, they were not pagans. They were descendants of the Jewish nation. Their leaders were taken into captivity by the Assyrians. The Assyrians then brought foreigners to their country (2 Kgs 17:29). When these foreigners experienced problems in their new land, the king of Assyria ordered the return of the priests from among the deportees to the Jewish land. 'He must settle there and teach them the requirements of the God of the land' (2 Kgs 17:27). Therefore the Samaritans worshiped the same God as the Jews. According to Williamson (1982:1052), their creed included:

Belief in one God, in Moses the prophet, in the law, in Mt Gerizim as the place appointed by God for sacrifice (which is made the tenth commandment in the Samaritan Pentateuch), in the day of judgment and recompense, and in the return of Moses as Taheb (the 'restorer' or 'returning one').

As such, their beliefs were very close to those of the Jews. However, in his encounter with the Samaritan woman, the Lord Jesus referred to their religious ignorance, saying, 'You people worship what you do not know. We worship what we know, because salvation is from the Jews' (John 4:22).

What was the reason for this ignorance? Undoubtedly, it was 'their rejection of the whole Old Testament beyond the Pentateuch' (Gooding 1990:140).⁵ It was not possible for them to understand God's full revelation without the rest of the Old Testament.

³ Luke, however, painted a very positive picture of the Samaritans in two instances in his Gospel, i.e. the good Samaritan (Luke 10:33) and the grateful Samaritan (Luke 17:16).

⁴ It is not clear if Philip preached in 'the' city of Samaria or in 'a' city of Samaria (Polhill 1992:214).

⁵ To be more precise, beyond the book of Joshua, because the Samaritans had the books of Genesis to Joshua.

Besides the rejection of a major part of the Old Testament, the Samaritans also had pagan elements in their religion. Some of the nations that were brought to Samaria by the Assyrians kept their religions.

But these various groups of foreigners also continued to worship their own gods. In town after town where they lived, they placed their idols at the pagan shrines that the people of Samaria had built. (2 Kings 17:29, NLT).

For this reason the Jews 'refused to allow the Samaritans to participate in the rebuilding of the temple at Jerusalem' (Gooding 1990:139). Some say that in the latter part of their history they renounced their idolatry.⁶

The danger in a group like the Samaritans is that they have knowledge of some biblical truths. They practice a form of biblical faith, but they are ignorant of the full revelation of God in his word. The problem is worse when they add elements from pagan religions to the biblical revelation. This was clearly the case in the encounter of Philip with Simon, the magician, even though the majority of Samaritans responded favourably towards the message of both Jesus and the apostles (Williamson 1982:1052).

3. The case

Simon was practising magic. This makes it clear that his power was not from God.⁷ In those days, magicians were seen as people who knew the will of the gods. They possessed and used supernatural knowledge and abilities. Magic in Simon's day was a normal part of religion. Through oracles and dreams religious leaders were able to receive the will of the gods for the people and events.⁸ People were willing to pay magicians to find out the will of the gods or to be cured from their sicknesses (e.g. Acts 16:16; 19:23-40). People believed their sicknesses were caused by demons. In the book of Tobit, there is an example of how to treat people who were plagued by demons:

You burn the fish's heart and liver, and their smoke is used in the case of a man or woman plagued by a demon or evil spirit;

⁶ See Anderson (1992) for a Samaritan version of their origin and history. According to the Samaritans, 'they are direct descendants of the northern Israelite tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, who survived the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 722 BC' (Anderson 1992:941).

⁷ See also Delling (TDNT, 4:359) who suggested that Simon 'probably regarded himself as the Taëb'.

⁸ See, for example Jos. Ant 10, 195, 216 (Josephus and Whiston, 1987).

any such affliction disappears for good, leaving no trace (Tobit 6:8).

Simon was able to amaze the people through his magical practices. The influence of this power on the people should never be underestimated. The people saw things happening with their own 'naked' eyes. As such, he had the people under his spell. According to the Bible:

All the people, from the least to the greatest, paid close attention to him, saying, 'This man is the power of God that is called "Great"'. And they paid close attention to him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic (Acts 8:10).

Simon claimed to be someone great. The people said that he was 'the power of God that is called "Great"' (ἡ δύναμις τοῦ θεοῦ ἡ καλουμένη μεγάλη, *hē dynamis tou theou hē kaloumenē megalē*).⁹ This suggests a personal divine being designated as a power of the highest God. According to Page (1886:132), there was a belief in those days that the gods 'were revealed or became incarnate in the person of men. ... Simon is described as supposed to be little less than divine'. In Acts 14 the Lycaonians thought that Paul and Barnabas were gods who came down in human form (v. 11). They said this because through these apostles, God healed a man who was lame. The case of Simon was different. He did not ascribe his healing power to God, but to himself. The people therefore confessed that *he was* the power that is called 'Great'. This should not be strange. Their world was one where people believed in the supernatural and gods who dwelled among men in human form. They also believed that various spirits, which needed to be treated in different ways, caused sicknesses.¹⁰ Simon, the Great, the power of god among them, was able to help them.

Simon heard the gospel of Jesus Christ through the preaching of Philip. He believed and was baptized (Acts 8:13). However, his faith was not genuine.¹¹

⁹ BDAG, s.v. δύναμις, suggests the following translation: 'what is called the Great Power of God'. The NET is to be preferred because of the repetition of the article before καλουμένη μεγάλη. The idea in both cases is the same, as the NIV demonstrates: 'this man is the divine power known as the Great Power'.

¹⁰ See also the following examples in the New Testament: 'a spirit of infirmity' (Luke 13:11) and 'deaf and dumb spirit' (Mark 9:25).

¹¹ Stählin, quoted in Barret (2004:409), said that Simon's faith was not genuine, that is, his conversion was not real. He remained a magician ('*sein "Glaube" war kein wahrer Glaube, seine Bekehrung keine echte Bekehrung; er bleibt der Magier*'). Barret (409), however, rightly observed that nothing in the text suggests that Simon's belief and baptism 'was less sincere or in any way a less satisfactory convert than the other Samaritans.' My conclusion in the text is based on what happened in the rest of the narrative. Apparently Luke is here not concerned

He was amazed by the signs and great miracles that God did through Philip. In the past Simon had amazed, ἐξίστημι (v. 9), the people with his magic (v. 11), and now he was amazed (v. 13) by the signs and great miracles that were occurring.

Luke intimates that ‘he stayed close to Philip constantly’.¹² It was probably not clear to Philip why Simon was so ‘devoted to him’ (NAB). When the apostles came from Jerusalem, Simon’s inner motives were made manifest. He was looking for more power.

Now Simon ... offered them money, saying, ‘Give me this power too, so that everyone I place my hands on may receive the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 8:18-19).

This man would like to continue with his religion, but with Christian power, and especially the authority. He was looking for the authority, the right, to do more amazing things. Simon realized that his religion could not give him that power. He saw that power in another religion and he joined it. He was baptized and was ready to serve with the power of the new religion. He asked for the authority so that everyone he lays hands on may receive the Holy Spirit. ‘To him “Jesus” and “the Spirit” were simply two demonic powers, more powerful but of the same kind as those he already used’ (Gooding 1990:146).

Calvin (2000) suggested that Simon thought he would be able to sell the grace of God and get some greedy gain out of it. Simon clearly misunderstood the Christian gospel. He had to let go of his religion in order to be able to function within the gospel of Christ and in his kingdom. The fact that he was very prominent in his religion did not make him a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ after conversion. In his case, he wanted to buy the power for personal gain. In Christianity one can never buy a ministry. It will not be a genuine ministry. It will certainly be a human performance without the power of the living Christ to transform. The norms of Christian ministry are different from those of Simon’s religion.

What was the apostles’ response to ‘brother’ Simon’s attitude? He was punished.

with the inner aspect of belief and conversion. He simply reported what happened, as it was observed.

¹² Luke used προσκαρτερέω a number of times in the first part of Acts (1:14; 2:42, 46; 6:4 and 10:7). Louw and Nida (1989, s.v.) give the following explanation for this word: ‘to continue to do something with intense effort, with the possible implication of despite difficulty – “to devote oneself to, to keep on, to persist in.”’

But Peter said to him, 'May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could acquire God's gift with money! You have no share or part in this matter because your heart is not right before God! Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that he may perhaps forgive you for the intent of your heart. For I see that you are bitterly envious and in bondage to sin' (Acts 8:20-23).

Christianity is not a religion of outward manifestations, even though these manifestations are taking place. Christianity is a matter of the heart. The heart has to be right before God (v. 21). If the heart is not right before God, one can never have share or part¹³ in 'this' matter. To which 'matter' was Peter referring? The Greek word translated matter in this verse is *logos*. In verse 4, the believers went around preaching the good news of 'the word' (τὸν λόγον). In verse 14, the apostles heard that Samaria had accepted 'the word' (τὸν λόγον). Simon however had no part 'in this word' (ἐν τῷ λόγῳ τούτῳ).¹⁴ This word was the gospel with everything that belongs to it (Van Eck 2005:199).¹⁵ Peter's answer indicated that he did not consider Simon to be a genuine believer. Simon was going to perish; he had no share or part in this matter, and his heart was not right before God (vv. 20-21).

It is not clear from the rest of the story whether Simon made a definitive choice for Christ or not. Luke says that Simon replied, 'You pray to the Lord for me so that nothing of what you have said may happen to me' (Acts 8:24). Was this a prayer of repentance? Or did he go on his own way?¹⁶ We are not

¹³ μερίς (share) or κλῆρος (part) clearly refer to the statement about the Levites in Deuteronomy (see 12:12; 14:27, 29). The LXX translated the Hebrew phrase בְּרָכָה בְּרָכָה in the same way. The phrase refers to the blessings that were given to the people of God in the Promised Land.

¹⁴ According to Peter, Simon had no share 'in this word, matter, thing' (ἐν τῷ λόγῳ τούτῳ). Scholars differ in their understanding of λόγος in this verse. According to Barrett (2004:414-15), it refers to the word of God, or the gospel. He said: 'Christian initiation is bound up with the proclamation of the word of God, and Simon's proposal shows that he has no understanding of this.' Simon had no part in this Christian gospel. In verse 20 Peter spoke about 'the gift of God' (τὴν δωρεάν τοῦ θεοῦ). In the book of Acts, this phrase refers to the person of the Holy Spirit and not to his gifts (see 2:38; 10:45; 11:17).

¹⁵ According to Van Eck, it includes signs, baptism, receiving the Holy Spirit, and everything else that the gospel brings among people.

¹⁶ As a matter of fact, he did not pray. He asked the apostles to pray for him. Some Greek manuscripts have the following reading of this verse (see Metzger 1994:314): "And Simon answered and said to them, 'I beseech you, pray for me to God, that none of these evils of which you have spoken to me may come upon me'—who did not stop weeping copiously." According to Calvin (2002), 'we may conjecture that he repented', even though Calvin admitted that many early church writers shared a different view. Metzger (1994:314) adds the following comments: 'The addition gives the suggestion that Simon's tears are of remorse and

sure.¹⁷ The mission to Samaria, however, was not a failure. Many Samaritans accepted the message.¹⁸ The church was established among them. God gave them the Holy Spirit through the Jewish leaders of church in Jerusalem. From the very beginning of the Church, God did not want to establish a divided church, a Jewish church and a Samaritan church. The laying of the hands by the Jewish apostles signified the unity of the church. Encouraged by the ministry of Philip and what happened there the apostles also preached the word to other Samaritans.

So after Peter and John had solemnly testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they started back to Jerusalem, proclaiming the good news to many Samaritan villages as they went (Acts 8:25).

In summary, the case of Simon reveals a few things. It appeared that he professed to be a Christians and was baptized. He showed interest by maintaining a close contact with the evangelist Philip. However, his Christianity was only an outward issue. There was no genuine conversion. Simon was a leader of another religion who wanted to add elements of Christianity to his religion. Peter responded very sharply to this attempted syncretism. The content of the Christian message would not allow that.

perhaps of repentance; in the Clementine tradition Simon's tears are tears of rage and disappointment.'

¹⁷ The church Father Irenaeus (*Against Heresies*, 1:23.2) said that 'all sorts of heresies derive their origin' from Simon. He (*Against Heresies*, 1:23.4) continued to say: 'Thus, then, the mystic priests belonging to this sect both lead profligate lives and practise magical arts, each one to the extent of his ability. They use exorcisms and incantations. Love-potions, too, and charms, as well as those beings who are called "Paredri" (familiaris) and "Oniropompi" (dream-senders), and whatever other curious arts can be had recourse to, are eagerly pressed into their service. They also have an image of Simon fashioned after the likeness of Jupiter, and another of Helena in the shape of Minerva; and these they worship. In fine, they have a name derived from Simon, the author of these most impious doctrines, being called Simonians; and from them "knowledge, falsely so called," received its beginning, as one may learn even from their own assertions' (cf. Salmon 1999:905ff.; Stoops 1992:29ff.).

¹⁸ According to Acts 8:6, 'The crowds were paying attention with one mind to what Philip said.' The word *homothumadon*, translated as 'with one mind', appears a few times in Acts (1:14; 2:46; 4:24; 5:12; 7:57; 8:6; 12:20; 15:25; 18:12; 19:29). The word may express the idea of 'with one purpose', 'unanimously'. According to Bruce (1952:183), 'were paying' attention should be understood in a full sense as 'paying attention and giving a favourable response'. As such, the response to the gospel was not an individual choice but a unanimous decision as a group. This article will not allow us to explore this concept of 'groups-decision' further.

4. The content

What was the content of the message of the early disciples? A simple reading of their messages revealed that they were Christ-centred, no matter the context. On the day of Pentecost, for example, Peter preached a sermon in which he explained what happened to the disciples (Acts 2:14-40). His emphasis, however, was not on the things that happened, but on Christ and his glory. This can be seen in Acts 2:32-36, the centre of his message.

Peter's second message also had Jesus Christ as its centre. Peter and John healed a crippled man in the name of Jesus (Acts 3:1-8). When the audience saw it, they were all amazed. Peter used that opportunity to address the people. He did not focus on the healing that took place; instead he glorified the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 3:13, 15).

Peter's third message was given in front of the Jewish rulers, elders, and experts in the law. He did not change the emphasis of his message. He emphasised that the miracle took place in the name of Jesus. It was not through their power or in their name. Peter explained that salvation is only found in Jesus (Acts 4:10-12). The Jewish leaders tried to prevent them from speaking in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:18). The apostles, however, made it very clear that it was impossible for them to remain silent. They would carry on speaking and teaching in the name of Jesus!

Philip did exactly this in Samaria. 'The narrative emphasizes that Philip is performing the same kind of preaching mission as Jesus and the apostles' (Tannehill 1990:104). His preaching was very effective and many people became Christians. What was the content of his message? Luke described the messages in three ways: 'Christ' (v. 5), 'the good news' (v. 12), and 'the word of God' (v. 14). Philip proclaimed the Christ in 'words' and God performed 'deeds' through him.¹⁹ This twofold way of presenting Christ was the normal pattern of the early disciples. Most likely Philip preached Christ more than once to the Samaritans.²⁰

Preaching Christ is further explained in Acts 8:12 as 'proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ'. In the

¹⁹ The Greek word κηρύσσω (*kērussō*) should be understood as 'proclaim aloud'.

²⁰ The NET translated the Greek form here with 'began proclaiming' since this was the first time that such a preaching took place. According to Bruce (1952:183), 'he was doing so when the following events happened.' So the reference is not necessarily to the beginning of his preaching, but to what he was doing when the following events took place. And most likely they took place more than once. See Robertson (1930), 'began to preach and kept on at it'; Vincent (2002, 1:488) '*Kept doing* from time to time.'

preaching of the apostles, the kingdom of God was related to the person of Christ. In Acts 28:23, Paul testified about the kingdom of God, 'trying to convince them about Jesus from both the law of Moses and the prophets'. Preaching the kingdom, then, is preaching Jesus. Throughout Acts, Luke often referred to the name of Jesus Christ.²¹

The preaching of Philip is also described in Acts 8:14 as 'Samaria had accepted the word of God'. This same phrase is also used in Acts 11:1 to describe the preaching of Peter to Cornelius. In Acts 10 we have a detailed summary of Peter's message. It is clear there that the content of his message was about Jesus from Nazareth, the Man whom God anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power (Acts 10:38-43). This message about God's anointed Son is described as the 'word of God' (cf. Acts 4:31; 6:2; 13:5, 7, 46; 18:11). In other words, preaching the word of God or the kingdom means preaching Christ. It means preaching about him, in his God glorifying life on earth, his death as substitute for mankind, his victorious resurrection, and glorious ascension to the throne of God. This is exactly what Philip did.

In his encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch, Philip preached the same message. He used Isaiah 53, the passage that the eunuch was reading, to preach 'the good news about Jesus to him' (Acts 8:35). Preaching the good news and preaching the word of God means the same thing. It means preaching Christ! 'There is for Luke no difference between telling the good news of the word of God and proclaiming Christ; he is the good news' (Barrett 2004:403).

As stated earlier, the Samaritans had their own Christ, *Taheb*. Philip preached them 'the' Christ, the Christ of Scripture, the Son of the Living God. Philip must have explained what the prophets spoke long ago about the Christ (see Acts 3:18).

5. The consequence

The result of this kind of preaching is described in detail.

The crowds were paying attention with one mind to what Philip said, as they heard and saw the miraculous signs he was performing. For unclean spirits, crying with loud shrieks, were coming out of many who were possessed, and many paralyzed

²¹ See 2:21, 38; 3:6, 16; 4:7, 10, 12, 17, 18, 30; 5:28, 40, 41; 8:12, 16; 9:14, 15, 16, 21, 27, 28; 10:43, 48; 15:26; 16:18; 19:5, 13, 17; 21:13; 22:16; 26:9.

and lame people were healed. So there was great joy in that city. ... They believed Philip ... they began to be baptized, both men and women (Acts 8:6-8, 12).

The results of the Philip's preaching were: people were healed and delivered, people believed and were baptized, and there was great joy in the city. Transformation was taking place. The text makes it clear that the people *were delivered* from the unclean spirits and did not have to come every Sunday for deliverance. Luke used the same verb here as in other passages in his Gospel, where Christ set people free from evil spirits (cf. Luke 4:35, 41; 8:29, 33, 38; 11:24). When Christ is preached, people are set free. Philip preached the same Christ in Samaria as Peter did in Jerusalem. The result was the same in both places. The context was different, but the centrality of Christ was evident in both messages. It was not about the preachers, not even the miracles that took place afterwards. The content of the apostolic message was the living Christ. If preaching does not result in changed and transformed lives, a messenger should ask questions. The encounter of Christianity with people of other religions can never be without consequences. It is an issue of making a decision. One can never be a genuine Christian and a member of another religion at the same time.

Christianity has nothing to do with magic; magic is powerless before the genuine power of the Holy Spirit. God's Spirit can neither be manipulated nor bought. Simon illustrated that. A proper response to God's gift of salvation is much more than simply a 'what-is-in-it-for-us?' approach. It involves genuine commitment in response to the work of God's Spirit (Polhill 1992:221).

6. The contemporary application

In this section, some applications will be drawn from the study. Contemporary issues and practices will be compared with the message and the method seen in this passage. These applications have to be temporary and selective until a more thorough study of the passage and early Christianity is conducted.

6.1. Lessons for modern church leaders

Simon could not be a Christian and a magician at the same time.²² What do we see when we compare the events in Samaria with Christianity in some parts of the world today? The early Christians would have been surprised to find out

²² According to Roloff, quoted in Barret (2004:406), Simon's magic was synchronistic. It combined elements of Judaistic-Samaritan beliefs with Hellenistic-heathenism.

that 'Christians' today are members of secret societies (e.g. Lodges and Freemasons). Moreover, they would find it strange that some 'Christians' are practising witchcraft.

Philip and the apostles recognized the presence of magic and demons in the Samaritan context. They set the people free in the name of Jesus from these oppressions. Today, we find 'pastors' who accuse innocent children of being witches. They cause members of the Christian community to become addicted to horoscopes and to fear spirits.²³ They attribute sicknesses and life's other calamities to witches and wizards. Very often they even go so far as to identify the witches and wizards.²⁴

Once the pastor identifies the causes of the misfortune, he suggests the way forward. Friends and family members mistreat and expel the victims from their community. Often they have to live in seclusion, if they survive the ill-treatment (i.e. if they are not murdered). The 'pastors' use different methods to cast out spirits, such as placing the hands of the witches in near-boiling water, driving nails into their head, or pouring hot sodas on their head. The damage that these 'men of God' are causing is beyond repair.

It is sad to see that men like Simon find their way into Christian churches today. Many of the modern Simons label themselves as prophets, apostles, bishops, and so on. They rob people of their money and possessions. They create fear among believers by telling them that witches and wizards are all around them. By doing this, they make sure that there remains a 'market' for their 'ministry'. These so-called prophets and ministers cause great damage to the cause of Christ. Just like Philip, they should set people free, without needing to repeat the same deliverance ritual on a regular basis.

What should the body of Christ do in a context like this? It should do just as the apostle Peter did in the case of Simon. These false ministers should be exposed publicly! They should not be allowed to carry on with their evil

²³ There seems to be a desire among human beings, Christians and non-Christians alike, to find an answer for the life problems they are facing. They want to know why they are suffering from malaria, why they are not able to find a job, why they do not have children after many years of marriage, why so many people are dying in the village, etc. Are these just 'natural disasters'? These questions are legitimate. They remind us of the story of Job. Was what happened to Job just a natural disaster? The fire that burned his sheep, the great wind that caused the house to fall on his children and kill them, the Sabaeans who killed his servant and took away his donkeys and oxen, and the Chaldeans who took away his camels: were these things just accidents? Why did these things happen to Job and not to another person?

²⁴ 'In several high-profile cases, pastors have been implicated in promoting accusations, proclaiming deliverances, charging fees for exorcisms, and failing to report child abuse to police' (Phiri 2009).

practices within the Christian community. In most cases, they are untrained leaders, who started their own church after breaking away from another church. The most important thing is that they are not changed from the inside.²⁵ How then can we recognize these Simons? We should analyze their messages and their personal life. Is their preaching, teaching, and lifestyle Christ-centred? Are they pointing people to the Lord Jesus? Are those to whom they minister becoming followers of Christ? Are their followers being set free from the fear of demons and evil spirits? And, are the believers impressed by the power of the living God?

6.2. Lessons for modern messages

Philip's message in this context is an example for us. We should preach Christ! Our messages should glorify him. Meetings of Christians should be recognized as Christ-centred meetings. If someone attends a Christian church, he should not leave the church unchanged. The Christ-centred preaching should disclose the secrets of his heart and he should fall on his face to the ground and worship the living Christ (1 Cor. 14:24-25). Christ-centred preaching should have an impact on Christians as well. They should reflect the glory of the Lord. Through the Holy Spirit they should be made more and more like Christ as they are changed into his glorious image (2 Cor. 3:18). Zinzendorf said, 'I have one passion only: It is He! It is He!' (Ogilvie 1983:149). As the great nineteenth century preacher, Charles Spurgeon, once said:

You remember the story of the old minister who heard a sermon by a young man, and when he was asked by the preacher what he thought of it he was rather slow to answer, but at last he said, 'If I must tell you, I did not like it at all; there was no Christ in your sermon.' 'No,' answered the young man, 'because I did not see that Christ was in the text.' 'Oh!' said the old minister, 'but do you not know that from every

²⁵ The body of Christ should exercise care in dealing with these 'Simons'. A lot of harm is also done to the body of Christ by those who accuse everybody who does not agree with them of being a false prophet. If I do not believe in the power of God to perform miracles today, I will accuse everybody that claims miracles in his ministry of being a deceiver. It takes more than judging people based on our set of doctrines! It is sad to say that there are many preachers out there who cause much harm to the body of Christ. But they should not be categorized as Simon. They are preaching Christ. They are those of whom Paul said: 'Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill ... The former proclaim Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, because they think they can cause trouble for me in my imprisonment. What is the result? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is being proclaimed, and in this I rejoice' (Phil. 1:15-18).

little town and village and tiny hamlet in England there is a road leading to London? Whenever I get hold of a text, I say to myself, "There is a road from here to Jesus Christ, and I mean to keep on His track till I get to Him." "Well," said the young man, 'but suppose you are preaching from a text that says nothing about Christ?' 'Then I will go over hedge and ditch but what I will get at Him.'

Let your sermons be full of Christ, from beginning to end crammed full of the gospel. I have preached the gospel, not about the gospel, but the gospel, the full, free, glorious gospel of the living Christ who is the incarnation of the good news. Preach Jesus Christ, brethren, always and everywhere; and every time you preach be sure to have much of Jesus Christ in the sermon (Spurgeon, 2006:§4).

All Christians will agree: we should preach Jesus Christ. Christ was the centre of the apostolic preaching. However, some will emphasize one aspect of the work of Jesus more than another. Liberal theologians will agree that we should preach Christ, but they invent a 'christ' quite different from the one preached by the early church.²⁶

Some prosperity preachers will also say 'amen' to the fact that we should preach Christ. They will preach Christ. However, they only preach healing, deliverance, and provision through Christ. They preach about the gifts and not the Giver! Certainly the Christ that the apostle preached was the healer, deliverer, and provider. However, he was more than that. He was not a Christ in the image of the people or preferred by the preachers. The apostles preached that Christ 'died for our sins according to the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures' (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Preaching Christ in this way was 'a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles' (1 Cor. 1:23). It was however the good news of God, 'God's power for salvation to everyone who believes' (Rom. 1:16). It was not about the gifts but about the Giver! Christ-centred preaching should transform people into the image of the Son of God.

Some theologians believe that we should adapt the message to the time in which we are living. According to them, we, as Christians, should not try to convert Hindus. We must try to make the Hindu a better Hindu. This effort sounds very noble. However, that was not the command that Christ gave to his

²⁶ Such as, 'the historical Jesus of Nazareth can be seen as a Galilean shamanic figure' (Craffert, 2008:420; cf. Craffert 1999).

church. Christ's message to his disciples after his resurrection was that 'repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations' (Luke 24:47). The message that the Christian church can and should bring to the dear Hindus is forgiveness of sins in the name of the crucified, risen, and glorified Christ.

African and so-called 'black theologians' also try to find ways to proclaim Christ in their own context. In general, they propose two ways. The first one takes concepts from traditional religions as the point of departure. These concepts are used as means through which African Christians can understand the person and the work of Christ. They use concepts like 'ancestors' and apply them to Jesus. Jesus is then seen, for example, as the great ancestor (e.g. Bediako 1983; Nyamiti 1984), an approach known as inculturation. The second approach, liberation theology (e.g. Cone 1997; Boesak 1976), takes the present experience of oppression and exploitation as the point of departure. Christ is seen as the liberator of the oppressed. There is a need to scratch where it is itching. Christ should be presented as the answer in specific context. However, even these approaches tend to lean too strongly to the present context. They make use of concepts without adequately evaluating whether the underlying notions in the traditional religion can be applied to Christ as well. Can the underlying notions behind the ancestor within the African culture be applied to Christ as well? A leading African scholar, Dr Abel Ndjerareou (2010, personal communication), believes not. The 'Black Christ', the 'Liberation Christ', the 'Shaman Christ', and other 'Christs' were rightly criticized for their one-sided representation of Christ (see Konig 2009). These creations by academics make Christ what he is not. They overemphasize just one aspect of the person and work of Christ at the expense of others. Often his humanity is overemphasized at the expense of his divinity and the purpose of his mission. Salvation focuses only on the here and now, on the social without attention for the spiritual. Both sides need to be emphasized.

Jesus should remain the known Saviour wherever he is proclaimed ... Whatever form his re-imaging takes in the new emerging Christian religions should not change him into another figure that is not the God-Man, Jesus Christ (Akper 2007:240).

7. The conclusion

What then are the lessons that can we learn from this passage for missions in our multi-religious world today?

- 1) Christianity must never be cut off from its roots, if it wants to remain biblical Christianity. We cannot satisfy ourselves with a type of Christianity in which we include some elements of the Bible, but let go of other parts. Just like Samaria, our churches should accept 'the word of God' (v. 14).
- 2) The message of missions is Christ. Just like Philip, we should preach 'the Christ' (v. 5).
- 3) There can be no room for syncretism in the body of Christ. It is either full submission to the Lord Jesus Christ and denunciation of paganism or no Christianity at all. Above all, being a Christian is a matter of the heart (v. 21). Syncretism is evident today in many parts of the world. There are religions which claim to be branches of Christianity, but at the same time preach a different Jesus than the one preached by the apostles. They also adhere to ritual practises that are demonic. What they are preaching is at best a mixture of Christian ethics with an alien, pagan, even if modern, philosophical worldview; and at worst little better than Simon's superstitions (Gooding 1990:147).
- 4) The method of missions in Acts 8 was through proclamation (v. 5) and evangelization (vv. 25, 35). No matter what the context is, the message of Christ should be proclaimed and the good news should be preached. Furthermore, pseudo-Christians should be exposed, just as Peter exposed Simon (vv. 20-22). If a person confesses to be a Christian, he or she must demonstrate a Christ-like lifestyle. A person cannot claim to be a Christian and then go to another religion for spiritual help in times of need and crisis. He cannot serve two masters. He cannot live through the power of the Holy Spirit and through the power and influences of another religion. He will have to make a clear choice.
- 5) Effective missions should be characterized by genuine conversions, healing, deliverance, and great joy. In other words, there should be visible transformation.

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