

You Shall Be Of Me Witnesses--To The Religious Folks

by Ron R. Ritichie

"Churches in China: Flourishing from House to House," is the title of an article in a recent issue of Christianity Today. The article says that these house churches "closely resemble the diffuse New Testament church in the way they have survived, even thrived, in the vacillating political climate."

The article continues:

One of the most exciting developments in twentieth century church history is taking place today in China. According to reports from firsthand observers, there is a movement today that is seeing Christians increasing by the thousands in house churches. Although it is impossible to obtain precise statistics for China as a whole, staff and friends of the China Church Research Center traveling in recent months in 11 provinces have provided reliable information about this church-growth explosion. The research center estimates that there are between 25 and 50 million believers in house churches. Take Henan province, which has 111 counties. Fifteen of these have an average of 100,000 believers each. One county had only 4,000 believers in 1948; now it has 160,000. There are a thousand meeting points scattered over 20 communes. This one province is a good example since missionaries had made little progress there before the Communists took over . . .

In 1952, the Communists drove the foreign missionaries out of China. This action followed a wonderful ministry by the missionaries in the early nineteenth century when they built hospitals, insane asylums and schools in many parts of China. But by 1954 there were no missionaries left. Pastors were arrested, churches were burned down or converted into storehouses in an incredible squelching of the gospel.

The article goes on to say,

. . . Christians from house churches . . . were severely persecuted. Stories of harsh abuse are just beginning to surface: Christians in one county were forced to kneel before a pile of burning Bibles; a former Bible woman was beaten to death inside a church; some of the faithful were forced at gunpoint to recant their faith. Practically all Bibles and Christian literature were either confiscated or destroyed. Anyone who had past connections with missionaries or mission schools, or with overseas relatives, was attached. [In spite of all this] the house church movement is beginning to transform the entire nation.

That is what the book of Acts is all about. Despite scattering and persecution, the church would go on to change the world. This contemporary article is another scene in the beautiful tapestry which God is weaving in his calling out of a people for his namesake to honor and glorify him. (Acts 2:39)

The church of our resurrected Jesus Christ had been growing peacefully in Jerusalem under the power of the Holy Spirit after Pentecost, the teaching of the disciples, and the witness of the new community of believers. This was all part of God's plan for his church in the age of the Spirit, for he had told the disciples before he left them:

But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."

Now we are in Acts 8, several years after Pentecost, and the Lord is moving his church into stages 2 and 3, namely Judea and Samaria. This he accomplishes by allowing the witness and death of Stephen, which was followed by the persecution of the new Christian community in Jerusalem. This attack upon the church was

headed up by Saul, a zealous Pharisee, with the full consent of the high priest and the Sanhedrin. This persecution forced all the Christians in Jerusalem, except the apostles, to flee to the towns and the hills of Judea; and it forced a young man to go to Samaria to witness about Jesus the Messiah.

Remember that I am selecting these stories from the book of Acts to encourage our spirits in four areas. First, that we are still living in the age of the Spirit; second, that we have the Spirit's power within us to enable us to face all that life brings to us; third, that we are to "be of Me witnesses," so that God may call out a people for his namesake; and fourth, that we are to remember that these are examples of normal, authentic Christianity at work. The way God accomplishes all this is by his people talking about Jesus in all kinds of situations, not talking about themselves, but about Jesus Christ and him crucified and resurrected from the dead. That is the message. The resurrection is what makes the difference between selling Amway and witnessing about Jesus Christ. The resurrection is what changes lives now.

The Book of Acts is our model for living in the Age of the Spirit

The book of Acts should be our model for living in the age of the Spirit. When I read these stories I sometimes feel that my life is spiritually dull, that exciting things are not really happening in my life. That bothers me. Each of us should ask himself, "Am I witnessing? Am I trusting the power of the Holy Spirit? Do I have a sense of excitement, joy and peace? Do I sense that I am part of God's plan?"

Our third story concerns a waiter who was used by the Lord to witness to the Samaritan "half-breeds."

1. A Waiters Witness In Samaria Acts 8:4-8

Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word. And Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them. And the multitudes with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed. And there was much rejoicing in that city.

Although God had scattered these people into the hills of Judea, we don't sense that they went complaining about losing their families, their homes or their jobs. What we do see here is that after being scattered "they went about preaching the word." They did this because they were encouraged by the indwelling Holy Spirit in their lives. God showed them that in reality they were just passing through this world. We are aliens and strangers here. We have to stop living as though this is all there is.

The Jerusalem believers were also inspired by Stephen's wonderful testimony in defense of the gospel before he was stoned to death. Then they were instructed by the Lord to move out of Jerusalem, so they had a clear mandate to preach the word, to tell people the good news of God. In the same way, you and I who have come to know Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior also have a message of hope in a world without hope. The disciples preached the word everywhere. They went around heralding the word about Jesus the Messiah, using the prophets of the Old Testament, their own personal experiences, and using signs and miracles to prove their claim that Jesus was the Messiah.

Then we read that this man Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them. (We will find later that it is significant that Philip witnessed about "the Messiah" to these Samaritans.) In Acts 6 we learn that Philip was one of the seven men chosen to serve food to the Hellenistic Jewish widows. We are told that he was a man of "good reputation and full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom." But the job he was called out to serve in by the congregation, with the blessing of the apostles, was that of a waiter. That is not my idea of ministry at all, but Philip did it. Later, however, in Acts 21 he is called, "Philip the evangelist." He became the father of four daughters, all of whom had the gift of prophecy. There we also read that Philip met his former enemy Saul, who was now Paul the apostle, up in Caesarea. I wonder if they sat around and talked about those days when Saul chased the believers out of Jerusalem? In any event, God was now going to use a converted Hellenistic Jew who was now a Christian waiter to preach the good news to Samaria.

Samaria was the capital of the ten northern tribes, called Israel, during the period of the divided Kingdom (926-721 B.C.). The city was located on 20 acres of land, some 40 miles north of Jerusalem. Samaria was where Ahab, the king of the northern tribes, married Jezebel, who introduced God's people to Baal worship and built a temple to Baal in Samaria. God let that go on for a little while, but then he sent Elijah to contend with the Baal-worshipping priests. Elijah, of course, prevailed over the evil forces of Satan which were seeking to destroy God's people. That is how Samaria is remembered in the Old Testament. Then, approaching New Testament times, Herod the Great built a temple in Samaria to Caesar Augustus, who was worshiped there as a god. Samaria was also the stopping-off place for Persian sorcerers who came in to set up shop there. So we have quite a town here, and quite a handful for this witnessing waiter from Jerusalem.

Who were the Samaritan people? During the period of the divided Kingdom, Israel was taken into captivity by the Assyrians, who left a remnant of the power class behind to work the land as farmers. (2 Kings 17) The Assyrians brought in people from Babylon, Hamath, Sepharvaim, and other places. to replace the Israelites who had been taken captive. These outsiders intermarried with the Jewish remnant, but Israel always regarded the offspring of these marriages as half-breeds, calling them Samaritans.

In 540 B.C., Judah, the two tribes of the South, returned from their captivity under Babylon and began to rebuild the temple under Ezra and Nehemiah. These Samaritans, who were already in the land, offered to help in this work, but this offer by the "half-breeds" was refused. This resulted in tremendous hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans, and it exists right up to this day. Having had their offer to help the Jews build the temple refused, the Samaritans decided to build their own temple, which they did, a few miles south of Samaria, on Mt. Gerezim, in 400 B.C.

The Samaritans developed their own theology. They believed that there was one God, and Moses was his prophet; the Pentateuch was his written revelation; Mt. Gerezim was the appointed place for sacrifice; there was a day of judgment and reward; and a Messiah was coming. At the time of Jesus, 400 years later, hostility still existed between the Jews and the Samaritans. It was so bad that Jews would go to any lengths to avoid contact with Samaritans--even to the extent of adding miles to their journey when they wanted to go to Galilee because they would not pass through Samaria. But when Jesus was on earth he was willing to heal a Samaritan leper. And Jesus also told that wonderful story about the good Samaritan. (In the Jews' eyes, of course, there was no such thing as a "good" Samaritan.) Then there was the incident with the woman at the well. Jesus did not deliberately avoid Samaria, he went right into the town and asked a half-breed, a woman, for a drink of water. (John 4)

So the bottom line on the city of Samaria at the time of Philip's visit was that it was a city filled with religious folks who were influenced by Baal worship, by Roman gods, by sorcery, and by some followers of Jesus Christ. (We know from the passage in John 4 that "many Samaritans from that city believed in Jesus because of the woman's testimony.") (Jn. 4:39) The Jews refused to have any contact with the Samaritan people, but God loved them, and now was the right time to move in and call out a people for his namesake (Acts 15:14)

The man whom God chose for this task was a waiter on the run, who was filled with the Holy Spirit, wisdom, and the gift of evangelism, who looked Jewish, spoke Hebrew with an accent, and who was raised in a Greek culture! Hardly the ideal missionary candidate, but the Lord needed a clay pot, so he said to Philip, "You show up. I'll do the taking, and I'll do the signs. I just need an empty clay pot."

Philip began his testimony to the Samaritans by proclaiming to them the Messiah. He used the five books of Moses, which the Samaritans recognized, and focused on the passages which talked about the coming Messiah. There are 456 references to the Messiah in the Old Testament, 75 of which are contained in the Pentateuch. Philip didn't review for them all the bitter history, the hostility and hatred between the Jews and the Samaritans. He bypassed all that and got right to what they were looking for, which was the Messiah. We don't know which texts Philip used, but he may have quoted Deuteronomy 18:15, the text Peter quoted in the temple area after healing the lame man. Philip told them, "I know who the Messiah is. He has been in your town. He was crucified, was buried, and he rose again. If you will turn to him now he will come to live in your hearts."

During the riots in Berkeley in the 1960's, there was one man, who was known as Holy Hubert, who would

do just that_proclaim the Messiah. The students would make fun of this man, the professors would stare at him, while the radicals did not know what to do with him. Right next to him the Hare Krishnas would chant and dance, but he would just stand there and proclaim the Messiah. That is what Philip did in Samaria.

Three things happened as a result. First, there was unity. The text says "with one accord [they] were giving attention to what was said by Philip." Second, there was confirmed the truth that Jesus was the resurrected Messiah by the signs which Philip did in casting out demons in this demon--oppressed society, and by his healing of the paralyzed and the lame. Philip, by the Holy Spirit, reached out to the Samaritans where they were hurting most. And third, "there was much rejoicing in that city" resulting from the physical, spiritual and emotional healing which Philip brought to Samaria.

Our friends Ed and Kathy Wood hall and my wife Anne" Marie and I were once invited to counsel with a Jewish couple who were having marriage difficulties. We all spent an evening with them, sharing with them and praying for them. A couple of months later the four of us got an invitation to this family's Passover dinner. I had never been to such a dinner before, and I wondered how I should act. At the dinner I noticed an empty chair, and asked if they were expecting somebody else. "Yes," they told me, "we're expecting Elijah." As they went through the various functions of the Passover meal, I asked several questions about the symbolism of what they were doing. A couple of times I said, "That doesn't sound right to me. Don't you know that your Bible says.. ." and I went on to explain from the Old Testament the significance of what they were doing. This led into my teaching them for an hour and a half. When I finished, the mother said, "Why aren't you our rabbi! I never heard anything like this." I'm trying to illustrate normal, authentic Christianity. You just have to be available and show up. You think you are going to a meal, but God is preparing a feast for you. He wants you to feed people with the truth of Jesus the Messiah, the resurrected Lord.

Luke, the writer of Acts, now moves from Philip's dealing with a multitude of Samaritans to his encounter with one of Samaria's leading citizens.

2.. Simon The Magician Acts 8:9-13

Now there was a certain man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city, and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great; and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, 'This man is what is called the Great Power of God.' And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts. But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike. And even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip; and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed.

The words, "practicing magic," mean that Simon was a seer, a prophet of the occult, a sorcerer. He dealt with evil spirits to work wonders beyond the powers of men. But this religious community of Samaritans knew from Deuteronomy, one of the five books of Moses, that they were to have nothing to do with this kind of activity. (Deut. 18:10-11)

This Simon claimed to be "someone great," so that all called him, "the Great Power of God." While the Samaritans may not have been totally captivated by Simon, at least they were "astonished" (verse 11); he held their attention momentarily. So here comes this waiter, Philip, into town, preaching the good news about the Kingdom of God, until he became known as the disciple of the resurrected Jesus. Philip makes no claims about himself. He heals people of demon--possession, he ministers to the Samaritans' spiritual and physical problems. The result of Philip's ministry, though, is that people are eternally saved; while the result of Simon's magic is to leave people momentarily astonished.

Deuteronomy 13:1-5 is our guideline with regard to men who call themselves "the Great Power of God":

"If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, 'Let

us go after other gods [whom you have not known] and let us serve them,' you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you to find out if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall follow the Lord your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has counseled rebellion against the Lord your God who brought you from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, to seduce you from the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from among you."

Whenever the gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed, the enemy brings out his counterfeit versions, but Scripture has much insight on how to spot a counterfeit prophet.

When people tell you they believe in Jesus, ask, Which Jesus?

Again, notice what Philip did not do here in Samaria. He did not go into the hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans. Under the control of the Holy Spirit, Philip fulfilled the Lord's command to "be of Me witnesses." This he accomplished, first, by proclaiming Christ to them. Then he preached to them the good news about the Kingdom of God. He may have taught them from the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the spiritually bankrupt for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." And third, he told them that they may have already met this Messiah for whom they were waiting, (when Jesus came to Samaria and talked to the woman). As a result, many people believed Philip's word of witness, were baptized--and Simon the sorcerer was right there in line with the others. Simon continued on with Philip, observing the signs and wonders, and he was amazed. The question is, Did Simon become a real believer or was he looking for a new act for his magic show? When people tell me they believe in Jesus I always ask which one. There are so many who claim to be Jesus. But there is only one true Jesus the resurrected Lord who is revealed in the Scriptures.

So God's beautiful plan to use Philip the waiter to be his witness to the Samaritans is right on schedule. The news of this is carried to Jerusalem, and the apostles Peter and John are sent down to see what's going on in the half--breeds' town.

3. Apostles Sent From Jerusalem Acts 8:14-17

Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit.

There are several very important things happening here, but one of the most important is what is not happening to the Samaritans following their conversion and baptism. Philip knew that the Holy Spirit was supposed to come upon all who confessed Jesus Christ as Lord--as the Spirit came upon the believing Jews at Pentecost--yet he gave no instructions to the Samaritans about the Holy Spirit so they did not seek him. Why had the Holy Spirit not fallen yet upon the Samaritans? For four reasons, I think. First, we read that Peter and John went to Samaria to pray for the Samaritans to receive the Holy Spirit, the Samaritans having "simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus." Second, the apostles came down so that they could establish the authority of the Lord's apostles. There were no apostles in Samaria. From God's perspective, these Jerusalem apostles were not Jews, but apostles of Jesus Christ who were laying the foundations of the church. Third, I think the Holy Spirit was held back because the Lord did not want to have two separate churches, one in Samaria and one in Jerusalem. And the' leads us to the fourth reason why the Holy Spirit had not fallen upon the Samaritans--because God wanted to take two separate peoples and unite them into one. (I Cor.12:12-13)

One of Jesus' greatest gifts to us is that he takes all of us, Samaritan, Jew, Gentile, male, female, black, white, adult and child, and makes us one in Christ. When I was going to school in Philadelphia, one of my ministries was to go into a black ghetto in North Philadelphia and teach the gospel to black children. For a 29-year-old man who was trained to hate blacks, that was a very hard thing to do. I was scared to death the day I first walked into a black ghetto, flannel graph under my arm. There was a big crowd of black kids waiting for me

around the staircase of a ghetto building, and an old black woman called all the children inside to begin the class. The sight of 35 black kids and just one woman in charge of them terrified me. I had never seen so many black kids together before. I got my flannel graph out and put up my little figures. I was shaking in my boots, but they loved the teaching, although I didn't know it at the time. The following week when I arrived to teach I found all the kids waiting for me. They come tearing up the street, asking, "What are you going to teach us today?" My heart just filled up with love for those kids and that woman. One child said something which I will never forget. He said, "Ron, before you teach, could I just touch your hair?" I said, "No, not unless you let me touch your hair." At 29, I had been so taught to stay away from blacks that I never even had the joy of touching a black man's hair. That is what hatred can do. That day I experienced physically the spiritual reality of our oneness.

How could these two opposing peoples, the Jews and the Samaritans, become one in Christ? God's answer was to withhold the Holy Spirit and send the apostles to Samaria to pray for and lay hands on these once--hated half--breeds. Recognizing the apostles to be the servants of Jesus the Messiah, the Samaritans experienced what Paul was later to write:

**For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.
(1 Cor.12:13)**

Now we come to the question, was Simon a true believer?

4 Will The Real Simon Please Stand Up?

Acts 8:18-24

Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, "Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity. " But Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

Christians are allowed to examine the fruits of each other lives. A man may say he's an apple tree, and for three seasons you may not be able to tell if he's telling the truth or not. But come harvest time there had better be apples on that tree. Simon the sorcerer was saying he was an apple tree, but Peter saw right through this, saying, in effect, "Don't tell me you're an apple tree. I see the intent of your heart through the power of the Holy Spirit. May you and your money perish for trying to buy the Holy Spirit. Your heart is filled with wickedness. You need to pray that God will forgive your evil heart because you're filled with bitterness and held in bondage. You want to be somebody. You're seeking the Holy Spirit as an act for your magic show. Well, we're not in show business. We're trying to bring the Jews and the Samaritans together in Christ and all you can think of is what's in it for you." Simon said, "Pray for me," but Peter replied, "Pray for you? Why aren't you praying for yourself? If you're truly a follower of Jesus Christ, you pray." Simon just wanted something for himself in the here and now; he didn't want eternal salvation. We have many such among us too in our time, but they cannot stay disguised forever because sooner or later they will have to produce the fruit they claim they can produce.

We are living in the age of the Spirit, and we are empowered by him to be witnesses of Jesus Christ. That means that the Spirit will scatter us into all kinds of places to talk about Jesus. It doesn't matter who we are. God uses all kinds of people--even waiters in Greek costumes, speaking Hebrew with a Greek accent. Just show up. Be available and sensitive to the Holy Spirit and watch him use you to his honor and glory. Know while you are doing this, however, that there is an enemy who is trying to destroy you. Remember that there are false, so-called believers all around you. But don't worry about them; God will point them out in time. Keep witnessing so that men and women will come to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

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Acts 8:4-24
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