



# Central Peninsula Church

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## From Persecution to Proclamation

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

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One of the fun things about being a believer is that you never know who God is going to bring into your church. Many years ago in the late 70's when I was a baby Christian there was a rumor that Eldridge Cleaver had become a believer. Back in the 60's Eldridge was the leader of a group called the Black Panthers. In 1957 he was convicted of assault with intent to murder. While he was in San Quentin and Folsom Prison he wrote some essays on racial issues and revolutionary violence, which later got published in a book called, *Soul On Ice*.

That book became the philosophical foundation for the Black Power movement. In one of the essays he described his rape of a white woman as an insurrectionary act that delighted him because he was trampling upon white man's law and defiling his women.

In 1968 he ran for President and lost. Later that year he was wounded in a shootout in Oakland between Black Panthers and police. Before he was convicted, he jumped bail and fled the US for a life of exile in Cuba, Algeria and France.

But while he was there something happened. He had a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. He came back to the US in 1975 saying he was a changed man. People didn't quite know what to do with him. Somehow, during that time, my pastor, Ray Stedman, befriended him. Ray invited him to come to PBC in Palo Alto and share his story with us. I was 19 years old at the time, living with my parents in Los Altos. My parents were not believers and very skeptical about this movement of "born again" Christians that I was becoming involved with. And then I told them that I was going to hear Eldridge Cleaver speak at my church. I even invited them! Needless to say, they were more than a little upset!

I went anyway and vividly remember a packed house at PBC listening to Eldridge tell his story of coming to Christ. There were no seats left in the church so I sat on the floor and hung on every word.

Unfortunately, that's not the end of the story. In the months and years that followed Eldridge confirmed some of my parent's worst fears. He adopted some very wrong and damaging views about marriage. He became addicted to crack cocaine. He almost died in 1994 after being struck in the head by a fellow addict. As you might imagine, I didn't bring the subject up of Eldridge Cleaver much with my parents.

But one of the things I've come to appreciate is how Ray was willing to risk the reputation of his church on

him. I believe he really loved Eldridge. He really believed that God could change anyone. He really believed that we needed to hear his story. I think he knew that it was risky. Some people wouldn't be too comfortable with the thought of a former Black Panther speaking in their church. It could damage the church's reputation. But it was a risk he was willing to take.

I wonder what God is willing to risk to build his church. I wonder what God is willing to risk for lost people to know him. I wonder if sometimes we're just too concerned with our own comfort or our own reputation to risk anything at all.

### **I. God cares so much about reaching the lost that he will risk the comfort of his people.**

**A. The church is scattered because of persecution:** We come this morning to Acts 8. Remember that Stephen has just become the first martyr of the Christian church. He was stoned by an angry mob; a mob led by an angry Pharisee named Saul. This led to a threefold chain of cause and effect. Let's start right in the middle of v.1.

**"And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison. Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word" (vv.1b-4).**

Three things happened: First, Stephen's martyrdom brought about a great persecution. That event was like a spark that ignited a wildfire of hatred and violence against believers. Secondly, this great persecution then led to a great dispersion. The believers in Jerusalem were forced to flee throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. And notice it wasn't the apostles who fled. For some reason they stayed in Jerusalem. Many scholars believe that it was primarily the Hellenistic (Greek) Jews like Stephen who fled because of the persecution focused on them. Finally, this dispersion resulted in widespread evangelism. Luke says they went about preaching the word. This is amazing. Can you imagine how scared they must have been? Stephen was

dead! But far from running in fear like scared rabbits, they ran like dogs and kept barking the gospel everywhere they went! So now you have not just the apostles preaching the word, you have everyday, ordinary believers preaching the word.

**B. Philip has a powerful ministry in Samaria:** One of the guys who was dispersed was Philip. Like Stephen, Philip was a Greek Jew who had become a believer. Also like Stephen he was one of the seven men chosen to oversee the distribution of food to needy widows. This was a solid guy. Luke describes his ministry starting in v.5.

**“Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them. The crowds 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. So there was much rejoicing in that city” (vv.5–8).**

Philip ends up in one of the cities of Samaria. You have to understand that Jews hated Samaritans and the feeling was mutual. The schism between them had a long history. Over 900 years earlier, Israel divided into two separate kingdoms. Samaria became the capital of the Northern kingdom and Jerusalem the capital of the Southern kingdom. And then, the Assyrians invaded the Northern kingdom and deported large numbers of Israelites and repopulated the land with foreigners, who intermarried with the remaining Jews. They even established a rival worship center close to Samaria, on Mt. Gerazim, and carried on their own worship. They accepted the first five books of the Bible but rejected the rest. The Jews in the south regarded them as heretics and would have nothing to do with them. So when the Romans conquered Palestine, they set up two separate provinces, Judea and Samaria, which was the case in Jesus' day. These people wanted no part of each other. They would go out of their way to avoid contact. To get from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north, you had to pass through Samaria, which was right in the middle. But a Jew traveling from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north would cross the Jordan to the east side of the river, make his way into Perea, go up the Jordan Valley, and then travel west into Galilee. He would go miles out of his way to avoid all contact with Samaritans, although it was twice the distance.

So it was a radical thing for Philip to go to Samaria and preach the gospel. This is like Israel today sending missionaries to the P.L.O. It was a bold move but really shouldn't have been. Jesus laid the

groundwork for this. Remember that conversation he had with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4? Just for Jesus to talk to that woman in broad daylight was unheard of. But he didn't just talk to her, he valued her and revealed his true identity to her. And then she went into town and told her friends all about him and there was a mini revival in that city as many believed in Christ. So this shouldn't be that big of a deal, but it was.

Look at the reception Philip had there. As he's preaching and healing people and casting out demons they were filled with joy. I love that! I don't think there was a lot of joy there before. But Philip comes with the gospel and now there is joy.

**C. Many Samaritans are converted:** And that joy meant that all kinds of people were getting saved. Look at vv.9–13.

**“Now there was a 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. 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.”**

Here we're introduced to a powerful magician. It appears that this guy was more than just a bag of tricks. His dark powers were so great that people thought he was God. And he had the ego to match it. He claimed to be someone great. Everybody loved this guy. He had a huge following. He was the biggest show in town, but then Philip comes along, healing people and preaching the good news, and people would now rather listen to him than to Simon. All Simon could do was entertain them; but the gospel was life changing. It was about God's kingdom and about how he sent his Son Jesus Christ into the world on a rescue mission for sinners. Notice how different Philip and Simon are. Simon exalts himself; Philip exalts the name of Jesus Christ. And so people are believing the good news and being baptized to demonstrate their faith. Even Simon gets in on the act. He realizes that something greater than magic is here. This God, this name of Jesus, is more powerful than magic. And so, much like Eldridge Cleaver, Simon is baptized with the rest of them.

I hope you can see here how much God is willing to risk to reach the lost and build up his church. He's willing to risk our comfort. The early believers were building a nice

little nest in Jerusalem. They were so comfortable. There were more and more believers there. They had Bible studies and prayer meetings and Awana and MOPS. Somehow they had forgotten that when Jesus spoke to his apostles right before he left he said, **“You shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria...”** (Acts 1:8). What ever happened to Judea and Samaria? And then Stephen is killed and persecution breaks out and they're forced out of their comfort zone into Samaria.

I wonder how far God will have to go to get us out of our little comfort zones. I'll go so far as to say that if we don't intentionally scatter for Jesus he will do whatever he must to scatter us. This goes both ways. Some of you are here on the Peninsula because you've been scattered from somewhere else and this is your Samaria, and you're thinking, “This place is so pagan. It's so anti-Christianity. How in the world did I end up here?” Others of you will be scattered from this place and you'll end up in some place like Dallas, Texas and you'll think, “This is place is so vanilla Christian. So many people go to church here I can't tell the believers from the unbelievers. Why in the world am I here?” It might be the loss of a job or the health of a parent or the special needs of a child that forces you out of here, but God wants to plant you somewhere else because there are people he wants you to reach.

And some of those people you might not feel a natural affinity with. Some of those people, like the Samaritans were to Philip, might not be in your comfort zone. Some of those people might even be like Simon or Eldridge Cleaver. One of the problems we Christians have is that we tend to think of guys like Simon as the enemy rather than the mission. But Philip saw Simon as the mission and not the enemy. Who are the Samaritans in your life? Who are the Simon's in our community that we think of as the enemy instead of the mission? What would we do with Simon today? We would probably picket his magic show. We would try to pass legislation to have him banned from our community.

I was watching the news the other night and I like to switch channels during the commercials so I can get more news. I went from one channel to another and they were all talking about the same thing: immigration reform. They were talking about all the different views and I was thinking, “Who cares?” And then it hit me: do I think of those illegal immigrants as the enemy or as the mission? I know a lot of believers who want to ship them all back to wherever they came from. But what if God brought them here not so they would get their green card but so they would hear the gospel? Do you see them as the enemy or the mission? You can apply this to those neighbors with the annoying poodle that never stops barking, or the colleague at work who always tries to one up you in front of the boss, or the nerdy student in your high school who follows you around like a lost dog. Maybe God wants to reach them

enough to risk your comfort level.

## **II. God cares so much about reaching the lost that he will risk the reputation of His church.**

**A. Peter and John visit Samaria:** Well, eventually word got back to the apostles in Jerusalem about what was happening in Samaria. And as I've already pointed out, this was a big deal. This was outside the box for these guys. So look what happens.

**“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”** (vv.14–17).

This passage is confusing. Back in Acts 2:38 Peter said, **“Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”** So why didn't these believers get the Holy Spirit when they believed? Some have said that these people weren't really saved in the first place; that something was wrong with their conversion, but there is nothing to indicate that. Others take this to mean that the gift of the Spirit is something that happens after salvation; that we should all have a two-stage experience. First you become a believer, and at some later point you get the Holy Spirit. But it's always dangerous to isolate any verse or passage of Scripture from the rest. We should always ask ourselves what is the general teaching of Scripture on this subject. On this matter of the receiving of the Spirit, the general teaching is clear: Becoming a Christian and receiving the Spirit is one event. We put our faith in Christ, and we receive from God the gifts of both forgiveness and the Holy Spirit. It all happens at once. So this experience of the Samaritans is not the norm.

Why then did God would withhold the Spirit from them when they came to faith? It was because of this great division between Jews and Samaritans that had lasted for centuries. This was a critical moment in the history of God's dealings with his people. The Samaritans were being evangelized and were responding to the gospel. It was a moment of great joy, but also one filled with danger. What would happen now? Would the schism continue? The gospel was welcomed by the Samaritans, but would the Samaritans be welcomed by the Jews? Would there be two different churches, a Jewish church under the apostles and a Samaritan church under someone else? If God hadn't withheld his Spirit until the apostles arrived, it's possible that both groups could have found

Christ without finding each other. There had to be a delay for the apostles to come up to Samaria and confirm what had occurred. When they arrived, they found everything as it had been described. The believers were genuine, except for the fact that they hadn't received the Spirit. So the apostles laid hands on them and they received the Spirit, and there was likely some outward sign to demonstrate that to them. This confirmed that the Samaritans weren't second class believers. They were a part of the church in Jerusalem, not a separate church. What had happened in Jerusalem happened to them also. The apostles, the foundation stones of the church, were their foundation stones as well.

**B. Simon tries to buy power:** But while all of this was happening. Simon is watching and he's impressed. Look what happens. **"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'"** (vv.18-19). Simon is really impressed with the power and authority of the apostles to confer the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands. He's thinking, "Man, this is some kind of magic! I could make a fortune on this if I had that power." It's like he had the coolest car in town and everyone loved him, but now someone else comes into town with a cooler car and so he wants to buy it. He asks, "How much will it cost me to be able to do the same thing." He sees the power of God as a commodity which can be purchased. Later in church history when people tried to buy positions of power in the church they called it "simony." We do the same thing anytime we think we can use human resources to purchase the power of God for our own ends. Anytime we turn the spiritual into the commercial. You can never pay God for what you want from him; what he gives he always gives as a gift.

So Peter responds very bluntly.

**"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'"** (vv.20-24).

Literally Peter says, "To hell with you and your money!" He calls him to repent and pray for forgiveness. When he says "if possible...you may be

forgiven" he means you can't presume upon the grace of God or take it for granted. God knew his heart and his actions showed that his heart was deeply rooted in bitterness and sin. And it really doesn't appear that Simon repented. Instead of praying for forgiveness as Peter told him, he asks Peter to pray for him. But no one can do this for us. When we fall into sin, it's not enough to ask someone to pray for us. That can be a cop out. We have to pray for our own forgiveness. Simon didn't want to do that.

Many people ask the question, was Simon a true believer? Will we see him in heaven? I'm not sure we can answer that question with absolute conviction, but I believe it's doubtful that he had ever come to true faith in the first place. When Peter says, "you have no part or portion in this matter" it seems he means that he has no part or portion in the blessings of the gospel. It's possible for someone to go through the motions of becoming a believer, raising their hand, praying the prayer, and getting baptized and yet not really truly being saved. The only way we really know is by the fruit that comes out of their lives, and right now Simon's fruit doesn't look so good.

Perhaps some of you are thinking, "Well see, that is what happens when you let guys like Simon come into the church. We ought to be more careful." Like Ray Stedman should have been more careful about Eldridge Cleaver. Something like that can destroy the reputation of the church. And God cares about the reputation of his church, which is why church leaders have to be men of good reputation. Or it could also contaminate the church. And God cares about the purity of the church, which is why he tells us to discipline people who are out of line. But, nevertheless, God is willing to risk even the reputation and the purity of the church to reach the lost. Are we?

Several years ago we had a man share his story with us named Walt Heyer. Walt was born a man but later had a sex change operation to be a woman. When he came to this church he was a woman named Laura. He even went to the women's retreat! But as Christ began to work in his life he knew he should go back to being a man, so he did. We had him share his story in front of the church. It was a great day for our church. The only problem is that a few months later he couldn't handle it and went back to being Laura. Several years followed of going back and forth. Some people said, "Told you so. That's what happens when you let people like that into your church."

Yes, that is what happens. But it's so worth the risk. And God forbid we ever prefer a sanitized version of the church, where there is no one like Simon or Eldridge or Walt.

Peter and John didn't. That's why v.25 says that as they head back to Jerusalem they continued to preach the gospel in the Samaritan villages. They didn't go the long way around; they went right through Samaria.

## **CONCLUSION**

How much is God willing to risk to build his church and reach the lost? He's willing to risk our comfort and he's willing to risk our reputation and even our purity.

And the good news is that sometimes, even the Simon's of this world come back around. After Eldridge Cleaver almost died from a blow to the head by a fellow addict, he got off drugs, he got right with the Lord, and he got plugged in again with a good church. At the time of his death in 1998, he was working as a diversity consultant at LaVerne University. Walt Heyer finally stayed Walt Heyer and now he's happily married. I don't know if we'll see Simon in heaven, but I'm confident we'll see Eldridge and Walt and many more like him. Men and women for whom God was willing to risk our comfort and our reputation.

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