

Homiletics Analysis: Acts 8

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Acts 8 moves on three narrative panels. In the first (vv. 1–3), Saul’s persecution following Stephen’s martyrdom scatters the Jerusalem church into Judea and Samaria, with Saul himself making havoc of households. In the second (vv. 4–25), Philip goes to Samaria, preaches Christ, performs signs, and sees a mass response — then encounters Simon the Sorcerer, whose subsequent conversion proves hollow when he attempts to purchase apostolic power, drawing Peter’s sharp rebuke and calling him to repentance. In the third (vv. 26–40), an angel redirects Philip to a desert road where he meets an Ethiopian eunuch, a God-fearer reading Isaiah 53, leads him to Christ from that text, baptizes him, and is then caught away by the Spirit while the eunuch goes on his way rejoicing. The chapter closes with Philip reappearing at Azotus and preaching through to Caesarea.

The structural thread is the word “scattered” (diaspora, v. 1, 4) — what the enemy meant as suppression, God employs as seed-sowing. The gospel moves precisely along the fault lines persecution creates. The Jerusalem church did not strategize its way into Samaria and beyond — it was driven there. Yet Acts 2:8 had promised witnesses “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” — and Acts 8 shows that promise being kept, not by a missions committee but by a sovereign God who uses hostility as his instrument.

This Text — Intent

God is using Acts 8 to do two related things in the reader simultaneously. First, he is assuring the church — especially a church under pressure — that no human opposition can derail his redemptive purposes; persecution does not arrest the mission, it expands it. Second, he is demolishing the categories the church might use to limit the gospel’s reach: the despised Samaritans receive the Spirit, a sexually marginalized outsider (the eunuch) is welcomed without condition, and a manipulative sorcerer is confronted rather than accommodated. The gospel, Acts 8 insists, goes where it will, to whom it will, by whatever instrument it will — and no human gatekeeping, whether by opposition without or by transactional religion within, can contain it.

Subject Sentence: God advances His gospel through persecution, past every boundary, to the most unexpected recipients.

Primary Claim: God is demonstrating that the church's suffering does not hinder His mission — it *is* His mission strategy; and He is calling the church to trust His sovereign expansion of the gospel beyond every boundary it would instinctively draw.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Simon Magus Episode and Simony

The most historically significant interpretive issue in Acts 8 is the nature of Simon's conversion (v. 13) and what his subsequent request reveals. Roman Catholic tradition has used this episode to ground the doctrine of simony (the purchase of ecclesiastical office), which is legitimate as far as it goes. What the text actually addresses, however, is more searching than ecclesiastical regulation: Simon's desire to *purchase* the Spirit's power reveals that he has never grasped that the Spirit is a gift of sovereign grace, not a commodity acquired by wealth or influence. Peter's verdict in v. 21 — "your heart is not right before God" — and v. 23 — "you are in the gall of bitterness and the bond of iniquity" — is a diagnostic of a heart still operating on transactional terms with the divine. Whether Simon was genuinely converted (v. 13 says he "believed and was baptized") and then fell into grievous sin, or whether his "belief" was the same category as the faith that "was not right before God," is a genuine exegetical question. The Reformed reading, consistent with the overall Lukan theology of Acts (cf. the Ananias and Sapphira episode), is that Acts does not guarantee the genuineness of every reported conversion — Simon's response to signs (v. 13: "seeing the signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed") mirrors exactly the response Jesus warns against in John 2:23-25. The text leaves the verdict appropriately open — Peter says "if perhaps" (v. 22) — but the emphasis falls not on resolving Simon's soteriological status but on confronting the transactional heart wherever it appears, including in those who have been baptized into the community.

Wesleyan/Arminian readers use Simon as evidence that genuine believers can fall from grace. The text does not resolve this — it does not affirm Simon's conversion was genuine, nor does it state he was finally reprobate. This is a pitfall to avoid in either direction: pressing the text to prove Calvinist perseverance or Arminian apostasy imports a debate the text is not conducting.

The Ethiopian Eunuch and Inclusion

Progressive and liberation readings of vv. 26–40 rightly surface the radical inclusion this episode enacts — a sexually marginalized outsider, barred from the assembly under Deuteronomy 23:1, is welcomed without condition into the body of Christ, fulfilling Isaiah 56:3-5's promise that "the eunuch who keeps my sabbaths" will be given "a name better than sons and daughters." This is a legitimate and textually grounded observation, and it belongs in any faithful exposition. Where this reading overreaches is in abstracting the eunuch's marginalization into a general warrant for including persons on the basis of contemporary identity categories the text does not address. The eunuch's inclusion is

grounded in Philip's exposition of Isaiah 53 and the eunuch's explicit faith response to it — not in a principle of inclusion-without-conversion. The text's point is Christ-centered inclusion through the gospel, not inclusion as a freestanding social value.

Philip's Disappearance and Charismatic Readings

Pentecostal and Charismatic readers rightly note that Philip's transportation by the Spirit (v. 39-40) is presented as a straightforward narrative event requiring no demythologizing. Reformed exposition should resist the cessationist impulse to over-explain or rationalize this episode — Acts presents it plainly, and the text is better served by letting the sovereign mobility of the Spirit in mission stand as written. The Reformed qualifier is simply that this episode describes the Spirit's sovereign initiative in mission, not a normative spiritual gift for the contemporary believer to seek.

Key Canonical Support

- **Isaiah 53:7-8** (quoted in Acts 8:32-33) — Philip's entire encounter with the eunuch turns on this text; the passage presents the Suffering Servant who is silent before his shearers, whose life is taken away in humiliation — and the eunuch's question "About whom does the prophet say this?" is the gospel hinge of the chapter; Philip opens his mouth "beginning with this Scripture" and preaches Jesus.
 - **Isaiah 56:3-5** — The LORD explicitly promises that the eunuch who clings to the covenant will receive "a name better than sons and daughters" and will not be "cut off" — Acts 8 is this promise made good; the chapter is not only mission strategy but covenant fulfillment.
 - **Acts 1:8** — Jesus's commission — "Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" — is the interpretive frame for all of Acts 8; the chapter is nothing less than the fulfillment of this sequence in compressed narrative form, with Samaria (vv. 4-25) and "the end of the earth" (the Ethiopian, v. 27) both appearing in a single chapter.
 - **Genesis 50:20** — "You meant it for evil; God meant it for good" — the animating logic beneath Acts 8's persecution-as-mission-expansion pattern; Saul's ravaging of the church (v. 3) functions as the mechanism of the gospel's geographic spread (v. 4).
 - **Romans 8:28** — "All things work together for good for those who love God" — Acts 8 is the narrative demonstration of this promise; the things that appear most destructive to the church's mission (Stephen's death, Saul's persecution, Philip's forced displacement) are the very instruments by which the mission advances.
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Aim: To demonstrate from Acts 8 that God’s sovereign mission cannot be arrested by human opposition, limited to preferred recipients, or captured by transactional religion — and to call the church to active, boundary-crossing participation in a gospel that moves by sovereign grace.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1a	Saul approves Stephen’s execution	Links back to ch. 7; Saul introduced as consenting persecutor
1b	Great persecution arises against the Jerusalem church	“On that day” — immediate and severe
1c	All scattered throughout Judea and Samaria except the apostles	Acts 1:8 sequence begins involuntarily; apostles remain in Jerusalem
2	Devout men bury Stephen and mourn deeply	Continuity with ch. 7; mourning is public, not hidden
3	Saul ravages the church — house to house, dragging men and women to prison	The severity of persecution underscored; households targeted
4	Those scattered preach the word wherever they go	The key inversion: scattering = sowing; the verb “scattered” reappears
5	Philip goes to Samaria and proclaims Christ	Samaria = historic enemy territory; the Samaritan mission begins
6-7	Crowds give attention to what Philip says; unclean spirits cast out, lame and paralyzed healed	Signs authenticate the gospel proclamation; genuine response
8	Great joy in that city	Joy is a Lukan marker of genuine gospel reception (cf. Luke 2:10; Acts 2:46)
9-11	Simon the Sorcerer introduced — long practiced magic, amazed the Samaritans, called “the	Contrasting figure established; his power was self-referential

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	Great Power of God”	
12	Samaritans believe and are baptized — both men and women	Pentecostal inclusion of Samaritans; “men and women” echoes Saul’s victims (v. 3)
13	Simon himself believes and is baptized, continues with Philip, amazed by signs	His response is sign-based; “believing and being baptized” does not guarantee regeneration
14-17	Peter and John sent from Jerusalem; pray for the Samaritans to receive the Holy Spirit (had not yet fallen on them); lay hands on them; they receive the Spirit	The apostolic endorsement of the Samaritan mission; the Spirit’s coming is distinct here — theological debate on why
18-19	Simon sees the Spirit given through laying on of hands; offers money to purchase this ability	The defining moment: Simon treats grace as a purchasable commodity
20-23	Peter’s rebuke: “May your silver perish with you”; “no part or share in this matter”; “heart not right”; “gall of bitterness and bond of iniquity”	Severe apostolic diagnosis; “bond of iniquity” echoes Isaiah 58:6
24	Simon asks Peter and John to pray for him	Ambiguous: genuine repentance or fear of consequences? Text leaves open
25	Peter and John return to Jerusalem, preaching in many Samaritan villages	The Samaritan mission continues and broadens
26	Angel of the Lord directs Philip south to the Gaza road — “this is a desert place”	Divine re-routing; the detail “desert” heightens the improbability of what follows
27	Ethiopian eunuch described: official of Candace queen of Ethiopia, in charge of her treasury, had come to	A God-fearer of high social standing but marginal status (eunuch); “end of the earth” figure

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	Jerusalem to worship	
27b-28	Returning, sitting in his chariot, reading Isaiah the prophet	Reading aloud (ancient practice); the specific text will become the gospel hinge
29	The Spirit tells Philip to go and join the chariot	Direct divine prompting; Philip is not self-initiating
30	Philip runs to the chariot; hears him reading Isaiah; asks, “Do you understand what you are reading?”	Accessibility: the eunuch is reading but not comprehending; Philip’s question is pastoral, not condescending
31	Eunuch: “How can I, unless someone guides me?” Invites Philip to sit with him	Humility and receptivity; the pattern of guided reading as gospel communication
32-33	The passage being read: Isaiah 53:7-8 (Suffering Servant)	The text within the text — the Servant’s silence, humiliation, and cut-off life
34	Eunuch asks: “About whom does the prophet say this — himself or someone else?”	The question that opens the gospel proclamation
35	Philip opens his mouth, beginning from this scripture, and preaches Jesus	The interpretive key of Acts 8: all Old Testament prophecy points to Christ; expository evangelism
36	Eunuch sees water: “What prevents me from being baptized?”	The question of inclusion — answered by the gospel, not by Deuteronomy 23
37	(Textually uncertain in many manuscripts) — confession of faith in Jesus as Son of God	Many modern translations bracket or omit; the faith expressed in v. 36-38 is implicit in what follows
38	Both go into the water; Philip baptizes him	Immediate sacramental response to faith
39	Spirit of the Lord carries Philip away; eunuch sees him no more; goes on his way rejoicing	Joy again — Lukan marker of genuine reception; Philip’s sovereign re-deployment
40	Philip found at Azotus; preaches through the region	The mission continues; Philip will reappear in Acts

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	to Caesarea	21:8 as “the evangelist”

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–3	Persecution Scatters the Church
2	4–8	The Scattered Become Sowers: Philip in Samaria
3	9–24	The Gospel Confronts Transactional Religion: Simon the Sorcerer
4	25	Transition: The Samaritan Mission Continues
5	26–40	The Gospel Reaches the End of the Earth: Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: God advances His gospel through persecution, past every boundary, to the most unexpected recipients.

Primary Claim: God is demonstrating that the church’s suffering does not hinder His mission — it *is* His mission strategy; and He is calling the church to trust His sovereign expansion of the gospel beyond every boundary it would instinctively draw.

Applications (Five)

1. [Mind/Belief] — Reframe what opposition to the church means.

The Jerusalem church did not plan a Samaritan mission — God planned it through what the church experienced as catastrophe. Acts 8 demands a fundamental reorientation of how the church reads its own setbacks: the congregation that loses its building may be being scattered to plant ten congregations; the believer driven from a country may be the seed of a church in a nation with no witness. The question is not “why is this happening to us?” but “where is God sowing us?” This is not naive optimism — it requires the hard theological work of actually believing in a sovereign God whose purposes do not need favorable conditions.

2. [Affections/Worship] — Let the eunuch's joy confront our sense of what worship costs and what it gives.

The eunuch had traveled hundreds of miles to Jerusalem to worship, had been barred from the full assembly by his physical condition, was returning home having apparently not received what he came for — and yet after a roadside conversation about Isaiah 53, he “went on his way rejoicing.” This is worship grounded entirely in what God has done in Christ, not in institutional access, felt-experience, or favorable circumstance. The text invites the reader to ask: Is my joy in God the kind that persists when the outward conditions of worship are stripped away? Would I go on my way rejoicing, or only when the service was what I expected?

3. [Will/Behavior] — Identify and root out the transactional heart that Simon exposes.

Simon's error was not unique to first-century sorcerers — it is the default posture of every human heart approaching the divine: give me the power, tell me the technique, show me what I need to do so that I can acquire what I want. Every prosperity-gospel instinct, every treating of prayer as leverage, every performing of religious duty in order to obligate God — this is Simon at his booth, money in hand. Acts 8 calls the reader to examine where the transactional heart still operates: in prayer (“I'll serve more if You fix this”), in giving (“I gave substantially, so God owes me favor”), in religious practice used as a control mechanism. The rebuke is sharp: “May your silver perish with you.” No amount of religious currency purchases the Spirit's presence.

4. [Mind/Belief] — Trust that the Spirit-prompted conversation you did not plan is not a disruption of your day but an assignment for the gospel.

Philip was not en route to a comfortable ministry posting — he was redirected to a desert road by an angel and then prompted by the Spirit to run alongside a stranger's chariot. The text presents this as the normal operating mode of Spirit-directed mission: sudden, inconvenient, uninvited, and sovereignly orchestrated. The application is not a general call to be “open” in some vague sense — it is a specific challenge to the believer whose schedule, whose social comfort, and whose preferred relationships function as a de facto limit on where the gospel goes through them. The Spirit directs Philip; Philip runs. The question is whether we run or negotiate.

5. [Affections/Worship] — Allow the Isaiah 53 text Philip preaches to do to you what it did to the eunuch — make you ask the question that opens into the gospel.

The eunuch's question — “About whom does the prophet say this?” — is the question that unlocks everything. Philip preaches Jesus from a text about a Servant who was silent before his oppressors, whose life was taken away, who made no defense. This is the gospel at its center: the One who had every right to speak said nothing, so that the one who had no rights at all could be welcomed. The application is affective: sit with Isaiah 53 until the question becomes yours. Let the silence of the Servant re-awaken wonder at what the silence cost and what it purchased.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Acts 8 is a sustained demonstration of divine sovereignty over the mission of the church. God does not merely permit the scattering of the Jerusalem church — he employs it as the mechanism of the gospel’s advance. This establishes a theological principle that runs through the entire canon: God’s redemptive purposes are not contingent on favorable human conditions. They advance *through* adversity (Genesis 50:20), *through* the cross (Acts 2:23), and *through* the very persecution designed to suppress them. The chapter also reveals the Spirit’s sovereign initiative in directing the gospel past every human boundary — geographic (Judea and Samaria), ethnic (the Samaritan mission), and social (the eunuch’s inclusion) — fulfilling in compressed narrative the Acts 1:8 commission. Finally, Acts 8 presents a theology of the word in mission: Philip’s method in both episodes is to preach Christ from Scripture (vv. 5, 35), and the decisive moment in both cases is when the hearer responds to the proclaimed word, not to the performed sign.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Acts 8 is one of the New Testament’s clearest narrative demonstrations of the Reformation doctrine of *sola gratia* applied to the mission of the church. The gospel does not advance because the church is strategically competent, politically positioned, or numerically strong — it advances because God is sovereign over its advance. The Samaritan mission and the Ethiopian episode both occur precisely because human plans have been disrupted and human agents have been displaced, leaving the Spirit’s direction as the only operating logic. The Simon Magus episode, read within Reformed categories, is a sharp rebuke of any attempt to treat the grace of God as a resource available for purchase — whether by money, religious performance, or spiritual technique — and is a narrative exposé of what Calvin called the *cor incurvum in se*, the heart curved in on itself, that treats even divine things instrumentally. The eunuch’s inclusion, read canonically, is the fulfillment of the Isaianic new-covenant promise that outsiders would be gathered into the people of God through the gospel — not through circumcision or ethnic descent but through faith in the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 56:3-8). Philip’s expository method — “beginning with this Scripture, he preached Jesus to him” — is also a Reformed homiletical touchstone: the gospel is proclaimed from the Old Testament text by showing its fulfillment in Christ.

Main Takeaway

God will get his gospel where he intends it to go — through the church, around the church’s reluctance, and over every boundary the church imagines is permanent. What looks like

the church's worst moment (v. 1) becomes the mission's greatest expansion (v. 4). Stop treating your displacement as defeat. The same Spirit who scattered Philip to a desert road and put an Isaiah scroll in an Ethiopian's hands is still directing the church's movement — and he is not confused about where the gospel needs to go next.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the Simon Magus episode as primarily a church-polity passage.** The word “simony” has given this episode a long ecclesiastical afterlife in discussions of buying and selling church office — and while that application has warrant, it domesticates Peter's rebuke. The text is diagnosing the transactional heart as such: any person, inside or outside the church, who treats God's grace as a commodity to be acquired by any means has Simon's problem. To reduce this to “don't sell ordinations” is to inoculate the congregation against the text's actual indictment.
- **Forcing a resolution on Simon's conversion status.** Preachers eager to press Calvinist perseverance (“he was never truly saved”) or Arminian apostasy (“he was saved and fell”) will have to import material the text declines to provide. Luke's point is not Simon's final state but his present condition — “your heart is not right before God” — and the call is to repentance (“if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven,” v. 22). Preach the diagnosis and the call, not the dogmatic resolution.
- **Abstracting the eunuch's inclusion into a general warrant for inclusion without the gospel.** The eunuch is welcomed — but into *what*? Into the company of those who believe that Jesus is the fulfillment of Isaiah 53's Suffering Servant and who confess that faith in baptism. The eunuch's inclusion is through Christ, which means it is available to all — but it is not a template for inclusion on any other basis. Preaching that emphasizes the eunuch's marginalization without centering the Isaiah 53 conversation and the faith response evacuates the text's actual engine.
- **Reducing “those who were scattered preached the word wherever they went” (v. 4) to a program or slogan.** This verse is sometimes made the basis for generic “every-member-evangelism” programs, which may be fine in themselves but miss the text's actual point: these people did not choose to become missionaries — they were driven out of their homes. The proclamation in v. 4 is the spontaneous overflow of people who have encountered Christ and cannot contain the news under pressure. To program this is to misread the sociology of the early church's witness.
- **Neglecting the Acts 1:8 frame when preaching Acts 8.** Acts 8 is not merely a collection of interesting episodes — it is the fulfillment of the geographic commission of Acts 1:8 in real time. Preachers who treat the Samaritan mission and the Ethiopian episode as independent stories miss the chapter's governing logic:

God is keeping his promise, on his schedule, by his methods. The chapter is a theology of faithful mission as much as a record of mission activity.

- **Overlooking Philip's expository method as itself part of the homiletical point.** Verse 35 says Philip "beginning from this Scripture, preached Jesus to him." The method is not incidental — Luke records it deliberately. Philip does not begin with the eunuch's felt needs, his social marginalization, or a general argument for theism. He begins with the text the eunuch is already reading and shows him Christ in it. This is a model of Christ-centered, Scripture-rooted proclamation worth naming explicitly in exposition.