

The Fields Are White

- You all received the gift of a 2 week break from my teaching, with a business meeting thrown in as a bonus, so I trust you're ready to pick up where we left off in our series on the Sovereignty of God
 - I know at least a few friends of mine who don't normally attend this church happened by last week expecting to see me teaching
 - I think they got about half way through the business meeting before they realized I wasn't on the program for that evening
 - In the end, though, it was a good visit - they were added to the membership rolls, placed on a committee and signed up to bring a casserole at the next fellowship event.

- Tonight is the fifth installment in our series called Thy Will Be Done
 - In our first week we addressed how easily we can make the mistake of reducing Jesus into just a Genie, even as his mother Mary seemed to do at one point early in Jesus' ministry – which is why I called that introductory lesson God or Genie?
 - In the second week we spent time in Genesis learning the purpose of prayer – of why we pray to a God who never changes His mind as scripture tells us
 - In weeks three and four we studied wealth and health issues in scripture

- In all four teachings, I endeavored to select key passages of scripture that embody the fundamentals of each issue – that best capture what the Bible has to say on the topic
 - Tonight I'm going to continue that pattern

- Which leads me to make one small correction to the schedule
 - Next week is world events
 - So the topic for tonight is God's Sovereignty in evangelism, the making of the saints and growing of the church

- And tonight's lesson is call The Fields Are White
- As Christians we often speak about Jesus' final instructions to the apostles given in the final verses of Gospel of Matthew
 - We commonly call those verses the Great Commission
 - And if you asked the a Christian what the great commission actually is, I suspect you would get a variety of answers
 - For example, some might say it means to preach the gospel to all the nations – good answer
 - Some might say it's Jesus command to Christians to share their faith with their friends and neighbors – another good answer
 - Some might say the Great Commission is to baptize people in the name of Father, Son and the Holy Spirit – also true
 - You might even get some who say the Great Commission is what you earn from a making a big sale
- Well for the record, here's what Jesus said:

[Matt. 28:18](#) And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.

[Matt. 28:19](#) "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,

[Matt. 28:20](#) teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

- Let's consider those words carefully for just a moment
 - All authority has been given to Christ on heaven and earth
 - Now we know that the Father gave Jesus that authority, for there is no other name given in heaven or on earth by which men may be saved
 - Then Jesus says Go therefore...
 - Because He has all authority, we can be confident in going as He commands
 - We can be assured that we will not go in vain

- We can know that our obedience to his command to go will be followed by some measure of success – to include success that doesn't bear fruit until years after we have come and gone

- Paul instructed the Corinthian church on this principle when he says

[1Cor. 3:4](#) For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not *mere* men?

[1Cor. 3:5](#) ¶ What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave *opportunity* to each one.

[1Cor. 3:6](#) I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth.

[1Cor. 3:7](#) So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth.

[1Cor. 3:8](#) Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor.

[1Cor. 3:9](#) For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.

- The focus and credit for building the church – the Body of Christ - believers – is not on the one who plants the seed – evangelist sowing the Word of God in other words
- Nor does it go to the one who may come along later and water what was planted – the one who through love and encouragement nurtures the growth of new life in a believer
 - Both these people are merely workers in God's field – hired help
 - But God made the growth possible
 - God produced the new life in the believer
 - God receives all the credit for the creation of the building
- Jesus echoes that sentiment in the heart of the great commission
 - In verse 19 He says make disciples of all the nations
 - Disciples (math –e- te –uo) – a pupil, a student, someone who grows through instruction
 - And then Jesus says how we do that

- First we baptize new believers – baptism serves several purposes, but in this context it simply serves as an essential early test of sincerity
- When someone claims acceptance of the gospel - they declare their sinfulness and that they believe Jesus is their Messiah
- But yet they cannot bring themselves to participate in even the simplest public display of commitment - a baptism
 - It draws into question the sincerity of their confession
- Secondly, we are told to teach them to obey all Jesus commanded His disciples
 - Which is where we get our notion of discipleship – of bringing up new believers in the fundamental teachings of the faith according to Christ
- So, let's review
 - In the Great Commission Jesus told us to make disciples of the nations, and making disciples is:
 - baptizing new believers
 - And teaching them to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ
 - Does something seem to be missing to you?
 - Where did the new believers come from?
 - Doesn't the great commission include converting unbelievers to believers – isn't that part of our responsibility?
 - Well, not exactly. First, it's true that God has purposed to work through men to bring the Good News to others
 - In fact, the word Evangelist in Greek means one who brings good tidings

- And we know that through His appointed evangelists – His workers in the field, men like Paul and Apollos – God will bring new life, new growth to a lost and dying world
 - So in that sense, yes, the great commission includes faithful men and women bringing the Gospel to unbelievers, so that they may be converted
- But it's still notable that in His words to the apostles, Jesus made no reference to our responsibility for producing new faith
 - Rather Jesus placed our emphasis squarely on receiving that new spiritual life, confirming it and then maturing it
- You could compare our commission to the role of a doctor assisting with the birth of a new child
 - The doctor wasn't responsible for forming the child in the mother's womb,
 - The doctor didn't make the cells divide, form the structures of the body, start the heart beating
 - No, God did those things
 - The doctor simply stood at the end of the assembly line and received the new life as it was born.
 - Then he washed it
 - And then he handed the new life over to caretakers who begin to instruct it and bring it up in the ways of the Lord
- This is essence of the Great Commission
- Remember the words of Christ in Matt when he spoke to Peter

[Matt. 16:15](#) He *said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

[Matt. 16:16](#) Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

[Matt. 16:17](#) And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven.

- Flesh and blood didn't teach Peter that Jesus was the Messiah – only God can reveal that truth through His Holy Spirit

- We would do well to remember that the birth of new life – whether the birth of a physical life or the birth of new spiritual life – is the work of God through His Holy Spirit
- So what does an evangelist bring to the process then?
 - Well Paul answered that question in one short verse

[Rom. 10:17](#) So faith *comes* from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.

- At the hearing of God’s word, the Holy Spirit open the heart to faith
 - The Word pierces the heart Heb 4:12;
 - it is the Sword of the Spirit we’re told in Eph 6:17
- Now... God’s word may reach an unbeliever from the pages of the Bible or it may come from the mouth of an evangelist, but in either case the Word of Christ itself is the tool of the Holy Spirit for faith
 - When an unbeliever says they came to faith reading their Bible, who do we credit? God and His Word of course
 - But have you noticed that those same words, the Gospel from scripture come through the spoken words of an evangelist, we sometimes are prone to credit the evangelist?
 - But the Word of God is just as much responsible for that new faith brought by the Holy Spirit through the words of the evangelist as through the words on the pages of the Bible itself

[1Cor. 12:3](#) Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus is accursed”; and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.

- So, the simple way to explain the point of tonight’s lesson: God is sovereign in evangelism – over the birth of new life
 - Remember the example I used a few weeks back of the father working on his car with his son
 - The father does all the real work and he invites the son to join him so that the son may benefit from working along side the father

- Because the son is involved, the work is harder, slower and more error prone as a result, but the Father is willing to put up with lower efficiency because the work benefits the son
- And the Father loves the son so much, He doesn't want to work without him by his side – even if He could do it better without him
- It's the same in God's work of spreading the good news through us
 - We've been invited to participate with the Father, but if we're not careful, we can begin to claim some measure of credit for any success we experience
 - But God did all the heavy lifting
- Sadly, many churches seem to have lost sight of the sovereignty of God in evangelism
 - Many churches have produced entire generations of Christians that believe that everything depends on them personally
 - Some have even been taught if they do not share the gospel message with someone, they have somehow participated in sealing that person's fate in eternity
 - That somehow they share responsibility for that person's condemnation
- If there is anyone who may feel that way tonight, please allow me to ease your burden
 - Just as no one deserves credit for another man's salvation, no one can be guilty of another man's sin and just condemnation
 - Secondly, God is not dependent on any one man's obedience in order to bring the Good News to another
 - Remember Saul on the road to persecute Christians in Damascus – God was able to bring Him to the knowledge of Christ without the aid of another man
 - Yet God still found a man, Ananias, who would follow through in obedience and disciple Saul into Paul
- However, if you are prone to ignoring the great commission, don't take too much comfort by what I just said

- Because there are personal consequences for each us when we neglect our responsibility to obey that commission
- Remember in the 1 Cor passage earlier, Paul made mention of rewards for the workers in God's field

[1Cor. 3:8](#) Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor.

- If you are a lazy worker who does not do his part in the field, God will simply hire other workers to get the job done
 - It's His field and He will not let his crop suffer due to the mistakes of a poor worker
 - And those obedient workers will receive the wages that could have been yours
- You know, as workers in God's field, there is another kind of mistake we can make – one that isn't taught very often – one that's different than being lazy – and one that can have even more dire consequences for the church
 - This will lead us into tonight's passage – turn to Acts 8
- Background
 - Chap 8 begins with Saul agreeing to the death of an early evangelists, Stephen
 - You probably remember the story of how Stephen became an evangelists – he signed up to wait on tables
 - He was one of seven men selected to resolve a dispute over feeding widows
 - One of the men was Stephen and another was a man named Philip
 - And the story of Stephen and Philip are closely connected in more than one way
 - After Stephen is stoned to death for his testimony, wide scale persecution breaks out in Jerusalem as a result of his death

- And this persecution had the result of scattering many of the leaders within the young church to areas outside Jerusalem, as verse 4 explains
- This is a good example of how God can turn bad circumstances to good, because this scattering had the effect of spreading the Gospel and growing the church even faster
- One of these new leaders is Philip, who travels to an city named Samaria, a place that Jews rarely traveled, since Samaritans and Jews generally despised one another
 - And that’s where we being our passage tonight, in verse 5

[Acts 8:5](#) Philip went down to the city of Samaria and *began* proclaiming Christ to them.

[Acts 8:6](#) 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.

[Acts 8:7](#) 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.

[Acts 8:8](#) So there was much rejoicing in that city.

[Acts 8:9](#) ¶ 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;

[Acts 8:10](#) and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, “This man is what is called the Great Power of God.”

[Acts 8:11](#) And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts.

[Acts 8:12](#) 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.

[Acts 8:13](#) 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.

- In this city of Samaria, Philip begins his ministry in earnest
 - Before Christ departed the disciples, He is quoted by Mark at the end of his gospel as telling the apostles that they will have unique spiritual powers to aid them in spreading the gospel message in the early church
 - Among those powers are the ability to cast out demons, lays hands on the sick and heal them
 - Here we see Philip doing just that
- What makes Philip’s story so interesting is a man named Simon, the magician

- Simon has been practicing magic in Samaria for sometime
 - The text says he was there formerly – prouparcho means existing beforehand
- Now the story makes clear that Simon has real power – demonic power – the black arts
 - His abilities astonished the people of Samaria
 - And Simon gained great advantage from his power
 - He used it to claim that he was someone great and gain the peoples' respect
 - They even claimed he had the Great Power of God – something that sounds suspiciously like a counterfeit version of the Holy Spirit
- Equally important, I can assure you that Simon would have found ways to turn his abilities into profit
 - He probably performed for money or offering to cast out demons for money, or whatever came to mind
- Then one day Philip walks into town, and with him comes the true Power of God – the Holy Spirit
 - Philip begins to perform the miracles Jesus said he would in Jesus' name
 - And naturally, he amazes the city – and this a city already used to amazing spectacles
 - Many believe and many are baptized
- Now how do you expect Simon to react to this display?
 - Well, the scripture says that Simon was amazed as well – and he believed and was himself baptized
 - But it also says that he continued on with Philip – the Greek word proskartereo literally means to never leave his side – so Simon was intently interested observing the continuing miracles Philip is doing

- And I guess if we stopped here, we would have an interesting and encouraging story – an evangelist in his natural habitat
 - But of course the story doesn't end, so let's read on

[Acts 8:14](#) ¶ Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John,

[Acts 8:15](#) who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit.

[Acts 8:16](#) For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

[Acts 8:17](#) Then they *began* laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit.

[Acts 8:18](#) Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money,

[Acts 8:19](#) saying, "Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

[Acts 8:20](#) But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!

[Acts 8:21](#) "You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.

[Acts 8:22](#) "Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you.

[Acts 8:23](#) "For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity."

[Acts 8:24](#) But Simon answered and said, "Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

- While the persecution had scattered many within the church like Philip, the apostles had steadfastly remained in Jerusalem
 - But as word began to reach them of how Gentiles – even Samaritans – were responding to the Gospel...well, this prompted them to see events for themselves
 - And the scripture says something a bit puzzling here – the believers in Samaria had not yet received the Holy Spirit
 - Though this is not the normal experience for the church today, it did happen in many cases in the early church as recorded in Acts
 - And if you think about it, this difference makes perfect sense

- The gift to every believer of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is a unique characteristic of the church, available only since Pentecost
- So when this sealing first came to be – both at Pentecost itself and in the years shortly following – God decided to make the indwelling of the Spirit a demonstrable experience
- Something tangible and visible
- Something undeniable, so that the early church would have clear evidence that the Father was keeping Jesus’ promise to send His spirit to all believers to teach them all things
- Once that fact had been established, the Father ceased giving such immediate visible signs of the arrival of the Holy Spirit
 - Because He doesn’t want belief in Him and allegiance to Him to be based merely on what we see, but rather on faith – the things which are unseen
- So the Apostles lay hands on men and women, and they receive the Holy Spirit
 - From the text, it’s clear that this process of bestowing the HS was visible and impressive
 - No doubt the people who received the Holy Spirit were exceedingly thankful and they certainly gave praise to God and to the apostles for the gift
 - And then there’s Simon...Simon, Simon, Simon
 - Simon can’t stand it any longer
 - First there was Philip
 - Philip rides into town, and steals the show, takes the crowd away
 - One day business is hopping for Simon, and the next day a competitor with a better act shows up and ruins everything

- Simon has to take his hat off to Philip
 - You know there's really only one thing a con artist respects and that's a better con artist – at least that's what Simon assumes
 - Philip is cut from the same cloth as Simon, except that he's much, much better
 - Well if you can't beat 'em, you might as well join 'em
 - He's declared himself to be a disciple of Philip, and he's followed Philip constantly trying to learn the secrets of these impressive powers
 - Finally, after Simon watches the apostles bestowing the HS by laying on hands, he can't stand it any longer – he offers money for their powers
- Now maybe you're a bit uncomfortable about my characterization of Simon as someone who merely faked his confession of faith
 - After all the scripture says plainly that Simon believed and was baptized
 - Certainly that should settle the issue – Philip must be a believer, no?
 - Well, first are we saying that false confessions never happen?
 - I hope not, because the truth is they absolutely do happen
 - That's the reason why Peter and John both make strong points in their letters about the need for us to be discerning around others who claim to share our faith – to look for fruit
- Well, if Chap 8 of Acts had ended at the conclusion of our first passage - at about verse 13, then we would have no argument
 - But it didn't,
 - And thankfully because it continues, we don't have to guess about Simon
 - We don't have to rely on our intuition and on guess work while looking back two thousand years of time
 - Instead, we can rely on the eye witness statements of the apostles themselves who met Simon, talked to Simon and discerned his heart

- Consider what Peter says to Simon
 - First he says may your silver perish with you – in the Greek Peter literally says “Go to Hell with your money.”
 - And when the Apostle Peter tells you to go to Hell, he means it literally
 - Then he says you have no part or portion in this matter
 - Part = meris = no share
 - Portion = kleros = inheritance
 - Matter = logos = word (as in John 1:1)

[John 1:1](#) ¶ In the beginning was the **Word**, and the **Word** was with God, and the **Word** was God.

- In other words, you have no share, no inheritance in the word you’ve heard
- Then he says Simon’s heart is not right before God – read literally in the Greek, Simon has a heart that is not been set straight before God
- Then Peter tells him to repent before God and pray for forgiveness – but notice Peter adds that if possible, it may be forgiven him
 - For a believer, there is never doubt concerning God’s forgiveness
 - Had Simon been a believer, he would have already been forgiven for that sin and every other sin he could possibly commit
 - Yet here the apostles say there is doubt as to whether God will forgive his sin
- Finally, the nail in Simon’s coffin...Peter says he sees that Simon is in the gall of bitterness and bondage of iniquity
 - Interestingly, Peter begins that statement with the word horao, which means perceives - Peter has perceived something about Simon, something that can’t necessarily be seen
 - First, Peter notices that Simon is in the gall of bitterness
 - This is a colloquial phrase common in scripture, and it always means an intense envy of a person – bordering on hatred

- Simon envy’s these powerful men so much he can’t stand it
 - Secondly, Simon is still in the bondage of iniquity – he is a slave to sin, rather than a slave to Christ – he is an unbeliever Peter has discerned
- And in response to Peter’s statement, what does Simon say?
 - He says why don’t you pray for me instead? The unbeliever’s brush off
- What’s scripture teaching us here? Well, it’s an example of that second problem I said can happen in evangelism
 - When we lose sight of the real meaning of the great commission and shift our focus to making believers rather than discipling new believers, we risk filling our churches with Simons
 - To be sure, we’ll probably also gain our fair share of true believers too
 - But have you noticed how few churches make true discipleship the emphasis of their evangelism effort/
 - In fact, most churches have evangelism separate from discipleship – but evangelism is all about baptizing and discipling
- As I travel from church to church, and watch the mega churches on television or read the book on the bookstore shelves, it’s apparent that too many churches has become content to fill seats with people rather than filling hearts with the Word of God
 - For example, I wonder what percentage of new believers are actually baptized in most churches today
 - And how many of those are ever taken aside and personally discipled to grow in the knowledge and grace of Jesus Christ
 - For example, by participation regularly in solid Bible study programs
 - Listen to what George Barna said:

“Our studies consistently show that churches base their sense of success on indicators such as attendance, congregant satisfaction,

dollars raised and built-out square footage. None of those factors relates to the kind of radical shift in thinking and behavior that Jesus Christ died on the cross to facilitate. As long as we measure success on the basis of popularity and efficiency, we will continue to see a nation filled with people who can recite Bible stories but fail to live according to Bible principles.”

- And I submit to you that the one of the reasons this situation exists is because the Church has largely ignored the Biblical teaching of God’s Sovereignty in evangelism –
 - We’ve replaced reliance on the Holy Spirit to produce new faith with a reliance on new methodologies and slick church growth tactics
 - We’ve jettisoned our solemn responsibility to confirm new faith and disciple it, and replaced it with superficial weekly experiences that merely fill a square on our calendar
 - And even though your congregation may not be part of the problem, as part of the body of Christ, I believe we all share in the blame
- Now I would like to end tonight on a positive note, and thankfully the rest of Chap 8 gives me the opportunity to do so
 - Because after Philip leaves Samaria, he has a new experience
 - Philip hears from the Holy Spirit and here’s what happens:

[Acts 8:26](#) ¶ But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, “Get up and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a desert *road*.)

[Acts 8:27](#) So he got up and went; and there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship,

[Acts 8:28](#) and he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah.

[Acts 8:29](#) Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go up and join this chariot.”

[Acts 8:30](#) Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, “Do you understand what you are reading?”

[Acts 8:31](#) And he said, “Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

[Acts 8:32](#) Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this:

“HE WAS LED AS A SHEEP TO SLAUGHTER;

AND AS A LAMB BEFORE ITS SHEARER IS SILENT,
SO HE DOES NOT OPEN HIS MOUTH.

[Acts 8:33](#) “IN HUMILIATION HIS JUDGMENT WAS TAKEN AWAY;
WHO WILL RELATE HIS GENERATION?
FOR HIS LIFE IS REMOVED FROM THE EARTH.”

[Acts 8:34](#) The eunuch answered Philip and said, “Please *tell me*, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?”

[Acts 8:35](#) Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him.

[Acts 8:36](#) As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch *said, “Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?”

[Acts 8:37](#) [And Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” And he answered and said, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”]

[Acts 8:38](#) And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him.

[Acts 8:39](#) When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing.

- It’s so important to note that this second account appears within the same chapter as the account of Simon
 - Because it stands in stark contrast to the events in Samaria
 - Where one experienced turned on miraculous signs and wonders, the other relied on the Word of God
 - Where one experience had to wait for the Holy Spirit to appear to confirm faith, the second experience had the Holy Spirit involved even before it began
- The Spirit calls Philip to go out into the field
 - Philip responds and the worker enters his field, for the fields are white for the harvest
 - The Spirit prepares the ground, the heart of a man to receive the seed, the Word of God
 - The Spirit directs Philip to that man, where the sowing begins
 - As the man endeavors to understand the Word, he falls short and needs someone to explain its meaning

- So Holy Spirit prompts Philip to join him, so he may explain the truth and faith begins to grow
- And new faith prompts obedience, so the man seeks baptism and Philip complies
- And once the worker has completed his assigned task, the Master moves him to new ground, leaving others to nurture the new believer who rejoices
- What a beautiful scene and what a simple picture of how God does the work and yet we are invited to join Him
 - If you are ready to obey the great commission, then model your ministry after the second half of Acts 8
 - listen to the leading of the Holy Spirit
 - Watch for signs of a heart prepared by the Holy Spirit, of a someone who has ears to hear
 - Bring the Gospel by way of the Word of God
 - Emphasize the importance of baptism as a confirmation of new faith
 - And entrust that new believer in the care of those who will disciple him or her in the meat of the Word and the Love and other believers