

The Revolutionary Power of Christianity

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[0 : 00] Okay, well, how do you change the world? Changing the world for the better has always been a human aspiration for as long as we have existed as human beings, and changing the world and how to make it a better place comes on a number of different levels. Whether it's one of the contestants on the BBC's The Apprentice, who said in week one, I don't think there's ever been a candidate like me.

I'm going to change the world and create a legacy that reverberates through time. Bold claim, isn't it, from an Apprentice contestant, but he'll be sacked, fired on week three, I'm sure. Or maybe when a new government comes or a new leader is appointed, there's great hope and expectation, there's a new mandate for change, and everybody is excited until no change happens, nothing is any better, and everybody is just disillusioned. A few years back, a popular historian, Tom Holland, who also has a podcast called The Rest is History, he wrote about the impact that Christianity has made in our world, in changing the world for the better, and he wrote about it in a book called Dominion, Dominion, and the subtitle of Dominion is How the Christian Revolution Remade the World, and that basically sums up the thesis of his book, where he makes a well-documented case for how the central values and priorities of modern Western society, modern Western secular culture, actually come to us, not from nowhere, but they come to us from Christianity. So values like democracy, democracy, and freedom, and human rights, essentially don't just come out of our minds, they're not inbuilt within us, but they come from Christianity. So his book Dominion shows how Christianity has changed the world for the better, how the revolutionary power of Christianity has transformed human history more than anything else. And so where did all of this start?

Well, it began, of course, with the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and then it was followed by the explosive growth of the church. And that's what we read about in the book of Acts in the Bible. Acts essentially tells the story of the rise and the advance of Christianity.

And so from our reading in Acts chapter 8, what we see is the revolutionary power of Christianity to change the world, but also to change individual lives. Not just the individual lives of the people that we read about here, but our lives, your life and my life. And that's why this Bible passage has relevance for our world and for our lives today. It has relevance for your life, for my life, whether we would call ourselves a Christian or not. And so I'd like us to consider how Christianity challenges our minds. In other words, we seriously need to consider the impact of Christianity in our world and making our world what it is today. But also we need to consider how Christianity challenges our hearts and our wills. In other words, we need to seriously consider Christianity as a basis or as a foundation for our lives. Because the most powerful force for change in this world, for the better, is this revolutionary message of Christianity, the good news of Jesus Christ. And so from Acts chapter 8, let's just see three things that Christianity gives. It gives a global revolution, it gives a local revolution, and a personal revolution. So first of all, let's think about how Christianity gives a global revolution. And in the Bibles, in Acts chapter 8, this is in verse 1 to 8. And so up until this point, in the book of Acts, the believers, the Christians were all concentrated around Jerusalem. And that's where all the action takes place in Acts chapters 1 through to chapter 7. But here in Acts chapter 8, what we've got is the global expansion of the message of Jesus that Jesus predicted would happen.

[4 : 31] So before Jesus ascended into heaven in Acts chapter 1 verse 8 at the beginning, Jesus said these words. He said, So verse 1 says, So the church moves out from Jerusalem towards Judea and Samaria, just like, in a sense, if you drop a stone in some still water, you know, you get that ripple effect, concentric circles, it spreads out.

That's what's happening here with the good news of Jesus. But did you see how it happened? The church was scattered as a result of persecution. But notice who was scattered. It wasn't the

apostles.

We read that they stayed in Jerusalem. It was the other believers who were scattered. So a man called Saul, who would become Paul, was throwing believers into prison, trying to destroy the church.

And so the early believers had to flee for their lives. And so the scattering that happened wasn't actually a disaster. The scattering was part of Jesus's plan.

We read in chapter 4 verse 4, So opposition and persecution did not extinguish the church. It actually expanded it.

[6 : 28] Because as these early believers were scattered, they spread the word about Jesus. And so this is the outworking of a global revolution.

But the momentum didn't come from the apostles, the spiritual heavyweights, because they were still in Jerusalem. No, it came from ordinary followers of Jesus as they spoke to people about Jesus.

They didn't wait for some kind of strategy document for them to know what to do. No, they just got on with opening their mouths and sharing the message of Jesus. So persecution didn't intimidate these early believers into silence.

It actually propelled them into action, which has actually been the pattern for the spread of Christianity throughout history. For example, you might know of the growth of the church in China, because it's a good example.

After the communist takeover of China in 1949, all the Christian missionaries were thrown out of the country. And as a result, they were scattered to other parts of Asia, which then spread Christianity into hard-to-reach places.

[7 : 42] But meanwhile, back in China, it meant the Chinese lay leaders took on the leadership of the church, which then resulted in the church exploding in size.

And now, in one of the most powerful and most populous nations in the world, there's a huge percentage of Christians in China.

And, of course, in the UK, we don't face anything like the same kind of persecution that other believers in other parts of the world do. But if you profess to be a Christian, or even if you wouldn't call yourself a Christian and you're thinking about it, you know that being a Christian is kind of weird in our society.

People don't really appreciate sometimes what Christians say or think or do. And yet, despite the opposition that there is, God uses it to force his people forward in mission.

So, the opposition comes, but in a sense, it takes us out of our comfort zones and forces us to be faithful to do what Jesus calls us to do.

[8 : 51] You may have heard of Martin Luther, the German reformer. Apparently, he said that Christians are like manure. Christians are like manure. If you spread them out, they begin to be fruitful.

But if they're all together in one big pile, they basically just stink. And so, here in Acts, what we see is the believers being spread out and scattered. And as they're scattered, they proclaim the message of Jesus.

And so, this man, Philip, emerges as an evangelist. We read about him. In verse 5, Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. Now, the Messiah is Jesus.

And so, Philip took the message of Jesus to the people in Samaria. And we read what happened in verse 6 to verse 8. So, as Philip proclaimed Jesus Christ, God endorsed his message with all of these miraculous signs and wonders, just as happened with the apostles.

And so, the good news of Jesus is spreading out into the world, just as Jesus said it would. And yet, this Jesus revolution, if we call it that, still continues to spread out in our world today.

[10 : 05] And if we're on board, then we've got a part to play. Because it's clear that it isn't just the job of church leaders to push forward the mission and message of Jesus.

Every man, woman, boy, and girl who is a believer in Jesus Christ has the responsibility to witness to Jesus wherever God has placed us.

And God has scattered his people throughout this world. He's scattered us throughout the city of Glasgow. So, in different schools or universities or places of work or down our street or with our neighbors or with our family or with our friends.

Those are the places where God has scattered his people to bear witness to Jesus. And so, from its beginning in Acts, this book we're looking at, Christianity has revolutionized the world.

And it's happened as ordinary people have spoken about Jesus to people around about them. And that should encourage us, if we call ourselves a Christian, never to give up and never even to shut up when the going gets tough.

[11:17] Because maybe you're feeling the pressure for being a Christian in your workplace. And you want to speak about Jesus and it's difficult. And it's a real pressure.

But so too, just as real, is the revolutionary power of the message of Jesus to transform people's lives. For many of us here today, that is just what has happened.

Advances his mission. Okay, that's the first thing, a global revolution. Our second point is a local revolution in verse 9 to 17. So, Acts tells the story of this global revolution of Christianity.

Well, how does that happen? Well, it's got to happen locally. It happens in places. So, for Philip, he was in Samaria. That was his location.

For us, we are in Glasgow. And so, when we read here about Samaria, we read it at all sorts of different beliefs. There was all sorts of confusion there. And it's really no different to our context today, where there's a mix of beliefs, a mix of practices, very little thought for God, and lots of confusion.

[12:28] And so, Luke, who's the author of Acts, explains this confusion by introducing us to this man called Simon, who's a sorcerer or a magician. But another kind of magician you see these days, he's not some kind of cross between Paul Daniels and David Blaine, that kind of comedy figure.

No, this man is far more sinister, because he had this remarkable influence over the entire population of Samaria. Let me just read that in verse 9 to 11.

Now, for some time, a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, this man is rightly called the great power of God.

They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his sorcery. So Simon called himself great. He had this nickname of being great. So he doesn't win any awards for humility, obviously, but he is a celebrity.

The kind of guy, I guess, that Graham Norton or Jonathan Ross would invite onto their chat show to speak about his influence, because he's an influencer. Plenty of people followed this man.

[13:45] Plenty of people were taken in by him. The power that Simon had had a tight grip on people. He thought he was great. Everybody thought he was great.

In fact, this man is known as Simon Magnus, and so he is frequently mentioned, actually, in lots of writings outside of the Bible. Apparently, he became the archenemy of the church and was one of the leaders of a sect called Gnosticism.

But we're supposed to see the comparison between Philip on the one hand and Simon on the other, and it's highlighted in the Bible text.

So Philip comes along in verse 6, and he performs signs, and we're told that all paid close attention to what he said. It's Philip, and then we get Simon, verse 10.

He comes and he performs signs, different kinds of signs, and we're told all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention. Same word, attention for Philip, attention for Simon.

[14:49] And again, verse 9, Simon amazed all the people of Samaria. Then verse 11, he had amazed them for a long time with his sorcery. And then in contrast to Simon, there's Philip, where Simon followed Philip everywhere.

Verse 13, astonished. Same word that's used in the original by the great signs and miracles he saw. So people were amazed by the show of power from both Philip and from Simon.

And so there's a clash of power here, and we're meant to pick up on this and be asking, well, what is the stronger power? Is the stronger power this revolutionary power of the good news of Jesus Christ, or is the stronger power this power that comes from the world?

Because there's a clash, and which power will ultimately win in this battle? Well, the answer is obvious, of course, because there really is no contest.

The revolutionary power here and in history has not been stopped. Christianity is far stronger and greater. Because when Philip preached the good news about Jesus, you notice that the Samaritans believed.

[16:05] And then in verse 13, even Simon the sorcerer. This guy believed, and we read, he was baptized. I wonder if you can imagine the headlines in the Samaritan Sun newspaper that week.

Sorcerer saved. Conjuror converted. Magician miraculously moved. That's why I'm not a newspaper reporter. I never get a job for the sun, that's for sure.

And so while Simon, interestingly, appeared to believe, we soon discover that there's no real change in Simon's heart. And so what I'd like us to do is to come back to him in a moment.

But first, we just need to see something unique happen here as the Christian revolution gathers momentum. And the unique thing that happens is the way the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit in verses 14 to 17 of Acts chapter 8.

It seems strange because whilst the Samaritans believed, they hadn't yet received the Holy Spirit. And so it's described here as happening in two stages.

[17:13] So the first stage is there in verse 12. They believed in Jesus and were baptized. Verse 14, they had accepted the word of God.

But then the second stage is there in verse 15 to 17, where they receive the Holy Spirit when the apostles arrive. And yet this is the only place where this happens.

So the norm actually is in what Peter says in his sermon at Pentecost in Acts chapter 2, where he says, Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.

And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, the promises for you and your children and for all who are far off, for all whom the Lord our God will call.

So that's the norm. The norm is that when a person believes in Jesus, they receive the Holy Spirit. So why is it different here?

[18:16] Well, it can't be that there are two stages in our salvation, which is what some think. No, this is a unique event. It's a significant moment in the advance of the gospel of Jesus Christ, because it's now being proclaimed outside of Jerusalem to people who weren't Jews, to people in Samaria.

And remember, there was a deep racial division between the Jew and the Samaritan. And here, Samaritans are responding to the message of Jesus Christ.

And so the arrival of the apostles and the Holy Spirit to the Samaritans is actually a sign to say that the Samaritans are also true members of the church of Jesus Christ.

They receive the same Holy Spirit that came at Pentecost to show that they too have the same salvation, full salvation, in Jesus that the Jews had.

And so we shouldn't think that what is happening here is some kind of normal experience for Christians. It's unique, because it's the next phase of the relentless advance of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the world.

[19:28] Because the heart of the gospel message of Jesus is that we are lost, so we deserve punishment for our sins. But Jesus died so that we can be forgiven. And when we put our faith in Jesus, we receive the Holy Spirit.

And that's why there are no different classes when it comes to being a Christian. Nobody's got any reason to consider themselves as superior to anyone else.

We're nothing more than a sinner who's been saved by grace. And so this global revolution gathers pace as men and women in different places come to believe in Jesus.

Well, you might be saying, okay, that's fine. That was then, but this is now. So how does this apply to you and me? Well, let's move on to our final point. We see a global revolution, a local revolution, but let's think about a personal revolution.

And consider this for ourselves and how it applies to us as we think again about this man called Simon, who was the sorcerer. Now, the question is, did he undergo a personal revolution?

[20:39] Was he really changed? It says in verse 13 that he believed and he was baptized and he followed Philip around. So it sounds like he did.

But Simon gives himself away as a fraud. Verse 18 and 19 say, when Simon saw that the spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money and said, give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.

So he was amazed at what the Holy Spirit was doing. But he wanted the power for himself to exploit it for his own financial gain.

So in a sense, he wanted to control the Holy Spirit rather than allow the Spirit to control him. Remember, he was the celebrity who loved the limelight, and yet he still wants all the attention on him instead of on Jesus.

And so he wanted the kind of Christianity that suited him, that he could control, that he could somehow bolt on as an extra to his life. But he didn't want the real, genuine, true Christianity to revolutionize him.

[21 : 58] He didn't want it to impact his life that much. But Simon couldn't profess to believe in Jesus and carry on as a sorcerer. Because when it comes to Jesus, it really is all or nothing.

Because if Jesus is not Lord of all in our lives, then he won't be Lord at all. And so Simon is not unique here. There are plenty of people like Simon today.

And maybe you're like Simon. You're one of them. Where if you are going to consider Christianity, and its truth claims, or if you are going to live your life in a different way, then you want a kind of Christianity that suits you, that fits with your existing lifestyle, that allows you to carry on life as normal, instead of the true Christianity that in reality will turn our lives upside down.

Or more accurately, it will turn our lives the right way up. You see, if we're not ready to have our heart and our life revolutionized by Jesus Christ, then we can never be right with God.

And that's what Peter said to Simon. Verse 21, he said, you have no part or share in this ministry because your heart is not right before God.

[23 : 21] So what Peter does is he exposes Simon's heart. Because we know, don't we, that we can pretend to be somebody on the outside to the world and yet be somebody very different on the inside, in our hearts.

Because our heart is our true self. It's the seat of our feelings, of our desires, of our emotions, of our affections. Our heart is basically the control center of our lives.

And so Simon's heart reveals that he wasn't right with God. And what is fascinating is that here is Simon and he's telling us, essentially, it is possible to believe in Jesus.

It is possible to be baptized. It is possible to join with other believers, but still not have a heart that's right with God.

And that's why Peter essentially says to Simon in verse 20, to hell with you and your money.

Because Simon needed a revolution in his heart.

[24 : 31] And so what does this heart revolution involve? Well, we're told in verse 22 and 23, repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart.

For I see that you're full of bitterness and captive to sin. So Simon is told to repent, to turn around, because he's still captive to sin.

But Simon doesn't show any sign of repentance. Verse 24, Then Simon answered, Pray to the Lord for me that nothing you have said may happen to me. He's not asking here for forgiveness.

He just doesn't want bad stuff happening to him. But we don't actually know what happened to Simon. We're kind of left hanging. And yet he shows us that outward belief in Jesus, even being baptized, is no guarantee to a genuine turning from sin and trust in Jesus.

And so Simon's example really is a warning to all of us to examine our hearts before God. Are our hearts right before God? We need to examine ourselves because we need to make sure we don't resist the Lord Jesus Christ.

[25 : 51] Why do we not want to resist him? Because what we're reading about here is a global revolution that ultimately will take over the world. And I guess if we are fighting against Jesus, then there can only be one winner and it won't be us.

But just look how this section concludes. Verse 25, After they had further proclaimed the word of the Lord and testified about Jesus, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages.

Pretty unspectacular. And yet Christianity might sometimes seem pretty unspectacular. It is a revolutionary power, but it might not look great in some places at such, at some times.

Just like in the secular West, it seems as if it's shrinking. And yet this revolutionary power of the Christian gospel of Jesus Christ continues to transform human hearts.

And as it does, it transforms our world. It is an unstoppable power, even if it seems unspectacular. How come?

[27 : 07] Well, the reason is because the saving message of Jesus Christ is a subversive message. When you think about it, Jesus is the Lord of all.

He always has been. He is the one with ultimate power and ultimate authority. And yet the Christian message is that this Lord entered into this world.

He laid aside his power. He gave it up. He humbled himself by becoming a man. And then he died on a cross for our sin to be our Savior.

And so it's only when we see who Jesus is and what Jesus has done for us that our hearts will be revolutionized.

Our hearts will only be changed and only be right before God when we discover that we weren't right with God and we can't be right with God by doing anything ourselves.

[28 : 04] We can only be right with God through Jesus Christ. How does that happen? Just as it says here, by turning from our sin, repenting of it, and by trusting Jesus as our Savior.

And then when he is, then we yield our lives to him as Lord. And that will transform our lives in this world, but also for all eternity.

And the spin-off of that is that this makes the world a better place. Because ultimately, what will happen is when Jesus Christ returns, the Bible story tells us that will be the end of history, the end of the world as we know it.

When Jesus returns, he will come as judge. And he will put this world right. It will be far better than just becoming a better world. It will be a perfected world.

It will be a new creation. And it all happens because of the revolutionary power of the message of Jesus Christ. And so the question is, as we close, are you part of this revolution?

[29 : 18] If not, then will you join the revolution? How do we join the revolution? Well, by responding in faith to the good news of Jesus, to the one who gave up his life out of love for you and me.

And he did it so that we can be changed. We can be put right with God. And we can become part of this revolution that is ultimately taking over our world.

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