

THE WAY, SESSION 6

How Can I, Unless Someone Guides Me?

The Acts of the Apostles 8:4-40, Samaria, the Laying On of Hands, and the Man in the Chariot

Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. Participants watch the Gospel cross its first great frontier, into Samaria, carried by a deacon, and discover two patterns that mark the Catholic Church to this day: baptism completed by the apostolic laying on of hands that confers the Spirit, and Scripture read with a guide sent by God, inside the communion of the Church, ending in sacrament. The Ethiopian's honest question gives the session, and half of Catholic teaching on Scripture, its voice: "How can I, unless someone guides me?"

Catholic Touchstone. Confirmation. The Samaritans believe and are baptized by Philip, yet the Spirit "had not yet fallen on any of them" (8:16), so the apostles send Peter and John, who pray and lay hands on them, and they receive the Holy Spirit (8:17). The Catechism points to this very passage as the origin of the sacrament of Confirmation, the imposition of hands that completes baptismal grace (CCC 1288, 1315, which quotes Acts 8:14-17 directly). A distinct rite, given here through the apostles' own hands, conferring the Spirit: the anatomy of Confirmation, visible in the Church's first missionary generation.

What You Need to Know

Know the wound before you teach the healing. In the Judean telling, Samaritans descended from northern tribes intermingled with peoples resettled by Assyria after 722 BC (2 Kings 17); they worshiped on Mount Gerizim with their own version of the Torah. The Samaritans told a different story about themselves, tracing their line to the northern tribes and their sanctuary to the older and rightful one, so the history is more tangled than either side's polemic allows. What is not in doubt is the estrangement by Jesus' day: some Jewish travelers between Galilee and Judea crossed the Jordan to skirt Samaria, though others went straight through, John records that Jews had no dealings with Samaritans, and "Samaritan" could be thrown as an insult (John 8:48). When Philip preaches Christ there and the city receives it with joy, an eight-century schism is being healed. This is the second circle of Acts 1:8 opening on schedule, and it was persecution that opened it.

Philip is the deacon of Session 4, not the apostle: one of the Seven, set apart by prayer and the laying on of hands to serve tables, now evangelizing a region. Acts never calls the Seven deacons, but the Church has read them as the seed of the diaconate from very early on, and here that structure is already doing what the Church has always seen ordination do: conferring grace that overflows the job description.

The Samaritan sequence (8:14-17) needs careful, honest handling. The Samaritans truly believed and were validly baptized; Luke is emphatic. Yet something remained to be given, and it required the apostles themselves to travel from Jerusalem, pray, and lay on hands. Why did God withhold the Spirit's descent until Peter and John arrived? A reading with deep roots among the Fathers and modern commentators offers the most persuasive account, though Luke himself does not tell us God's reason: at the healing of a schism centuries old, God ensured that Samaria was visibly and sacramentally joined to the apostolic Church, not planted as a rival. One Church, one imposition of hands, no second Gerizim. And in that providential delay, the Church has long recognized the seed of the distinct rite she calls Confirmation.

Simon Magus (8:9-24) gives the Church a word: simony, the attempt to buy or sell sacred power (CCC 2121 cites this passage). Notice what his sin proves: Simon, a professional wonder-worker, watched the apostles' hands and concluded they possessed something real, objective, and transferable, so real he tried to purchase the ability to confer it. Nobody offers money for a metaphor; Simon's sin is its own backhanded testimony that something objective was being given through those hands.

The Ethiopian (8:26-40) is one of the most carefully drawn characters in Acts: a court official of the Candace, treasurer of a kingdom, devout enough to travel perhaps a thousand miles to worship in Jerusalem, wealthy enough to own an Isaiah scroll, literate enough to read it aloud in his chariot. He is the best-case reader of

Scripture in the ancient world. And when Philip, sent by an angel and prompted by the Spirit, asks whether he understands, this best-case reader gives the answer that inspired Scripture itself preserves: "How can I, unless someone guides me?" Prepare the steelman here; this scene speaks directly to the sufficiency-of-private-interpretation debate, and it ends, as Catholic reading of Scripture always ends, in a sacrament: "See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?"

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

2 Kings 17:24-34. The origin of the Samaritans: Assyria resettles the northern land with foreign peoples who mix the worship of the Lord with their own gods. Centuries of estrangement begin here, and end, in joy, in Acts 8.

Isaiah 53:7-8. The passage open on the eunuch's lap: the sheep led to the slaughter, silent before its shearers, whose life is taken up from the earth. The suffering Servant is the exact text from which Philip, "beginning with this scripture, told him the good news of Jesus" (8:35). Evangelization has a canonical starting point.

Isaiah 56:3-7. Three chapters after the Servant song, Isaiah makes two promises: the foreigner who joins himself to the Lord will not be separated, and the *eunuch* who holds fast the covenant will receive, within God's house, "a monument and a name better than sons and daughters." Deuteronomy 23:1 had barred eunuchs from the assembly; Isaiah promised the bar would fall. The man in the chariot is a foreigner, and Luke calls him a eunuch, a word that can denote physical condition or simply a court official. If the condition was physical, Deuteronomy 23:1 stood against him at the Temple, and he is reading, without knowing it, the scroll that promises to lift the bar. Acts does not narrate his treatment in Jerusalem, so hold that lightly and let the canonical connection do the work. Let the group discover this; it is the tenderest find of the night.

Psalms 68:31 and Zephaniah 3:10. "Ethiopia shall stretch out her hands to God"; "from beyond the rivers of Ethiopia my suppliants... shall bring my offering." The prophets saw the chariot coming.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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St. Cyril of Jerusalem, Mystagogical Catecheses (4th century)

Teaching the newly confirmed, St. Cyril explains that as Christ was anointed with the Holy Spirit after His baptism in the Jordan, so the baptized are anointed and sealed, receiving the same Spirit to strengthen them for battle. What the apostles gave by the laying on of hands, the Church continues to give, and Cyril insists the gift is not symbolic: the Spirit Himself is conferred, equipping the Christian as an athlete of Christ.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Jerome, Letter 53, to Paulinus (4th century)

Urging Paulinus to study Scripture seriously, St. Jerome points to the Ethiopian: a devout man, reading the very words of God in his chariot, holding the book and yet not knowing Him whom the book proclaimed, until Philip was sent to open the sealed text and show him Jesus. Jerome's moral is double: never presume to master Scripture without a teacher, and never doubt that the humble reader who asks for a guide will be given one.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Irenaeus of Lyons, Against Heresies, Book III (2nd century)

St. Irenaeus recalls the eunuch as a model of readiness: already devout, already searching the prophets, he needed only to be shown that the One foretold had come, and he believed and was baptized without delay.

Irenaeus adds that this man was afterward sent into the regions of Ethiopia to preach the faith he had himself received.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1288. From the time of the apostles, the imposition of hands conferring the gift of the Spirit has been recognized by Catholic tradition as the origin of the sacrament of Confirmation, which perpetuates the grace of Pentecost in the Church.

CCC 1315. The Catechism opens its In Brief summary of Confirmation by quoting Acts 8:14-17 in full: Peter and John laying hands on the baptized Samaritans, who then received the Holy Spirit. The effects of Confirmation are treated at CCC 1302-1305.

CCC 112-114. Scripture must be read within the living Tradition of the whole Church and according to the analogy of faith; the Church carries in her Tradition the living memorial of God's Word.

CCC 2121. Simony, named for Simon the magician, is the buying or selling of spiritual things; it is impossible to appropriate to oneself spiritual goods and behave toward them as their owner.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH

Thread 1, The Name. One session away. Guard it absolutely tonight; no hints.

Thread 2, The Map. Tonight the second circle of Acts 1:8 opens formally: Samaria receives the word, and a man from the edge of the known world, which is what Ethiopia meant to a Mediterranean reader, drives the Gospel south. Point at the map verse and let the group mark the progress themselves.

Thread 3, Peter First. When Samaria believes, it is Peter and John whom the apostles send, and Peter who confronts Simon. Even off-stage, the pattern holds. Tally silently.

Thread 4, The Breaking of the Bread. Quiet. Note privately that the eunuch's story runs word to water: Scripture opened, then immediately a sacrament. The rhythm of Word and Sacrament is becoming the book's heartbeat.

Session Goals

1. Participants can explain the Samaritan schism and what its healing in Acts 8 reveals about the unity of the Church.
2. Participants can walk through Acts 8:14-17 and articulate why the Church sees the origin of Confirmation there, including an honest account of why the Spirit's descent awaited the apostles.
3. Participants can define simony and explain what Simon's offer inadvertently proves about apostolic power.
4. Participants discover Isaiah 56 behind the eunuch and can present the Catholic understanding of reading Scripture with the Church, answering the strongest case for the sufficiency of private interpretation.
5. Participants each commit to one act of guided Scripture reading and one Philip question this week.

Time Note

Planned for 90 minutes: Win 15, Build 55, Send 15, prayer and memory verse 5. If running long, cut in this order: (1) the second Win question, (2) the Dig Deeper on Simon in later tradition, (3) compress question 2 (the Samaritan schism background) into your own 90 second summary. Do not cut questions 4 and 5 (Confirmation) or the eunuch sequence; they are the twin hearts of the session.

Part 2: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Holy Spirit, Lord and giver of life, you drove the scattered Church into Samaria and sent Philip running to a chariot. Send us tonight. Open the Scriptures to us as Philip opened Isaiah, seal in us the gift we received at Confirmation, and make us guides for someone who is reading the words of God alone. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win (15 minutes)

1. Tell us about a teacher, coach, or guide who unlocked something you could never have unlocked alone. What did they do that a book could not?
2. Have you ever seen an old feud or family rift actually heal? What did it take?

Build (55 minutes)

1. Read Acts 8:4-8. Who carries the Gospel out of Jerusalem, and under what circumstances? What is surprising about both the messenger and the destination?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Not the apostles, who remained in Jerusalem (8:1), but the scattered ordinary believers, "those who were scattered went about preaching the word," and at their head Philip, the deacon ordained to serve tables in Session 4. The destination is the shock: Samaria, the despised rival, the eight-hundred-year wound. Persecution meant to crush the Church becomes the delivery system of Acts 1:8's second circle, and the office created for a food dispute becomes the spearhead of world evangelization. God wastes nothing, including His enemies' plans.

2. Some history so we feel the weight: read 2 Kings 17:24-29 for the Samaritans' origin, and recall John 4:9, "Jews have no dealings with Samaritans." Given centuries of hatred, what does "there was much joy in that city" (8:8) actually mean?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

It means a schism older than Rome itself is being healed. The Samaritans were the half-brothers, the wrong-mountain worshipers, the people Jews crossed rivers to avoid. Jesus had already planted the seed there, at a well, with a woman (John 4). Now the city that heard "salvation is from the Jews" receives salvation from a Jew, with joy. The Gospel's first frontier crossing is not to strangers but to estranged family, which is usually the harder mission, and the one closest to home for most of us.

3. Read Acts 8:9-13. Who is Simon, what was his standing in the city, and what happens to him? Take Luke at his word in verse 13.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

A magician who had long amazed the city, called by the people "the power of God which is called Great," a man accustomed to being the show. And Luke says plainly: Simon himself believed, was baptized, and continued with Philip, amazed in his turn. Take it at face value; his baptism was real. What follows is the story of a real convert whose old operating system, power as commodity, reasserts itself, which makes him a warning for the baptized, not a caricature of outsiders.

4. Now the touchstone. Read Acts 8:14-17 slowly, twice. List what the Samaritans already had, what they lacked, who was sent, and what the apostles did. What is odd here, and what does the Church see in it?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

They had: genuine faith and valid baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus. They lacked: the Spirit's descent, "for it had not yet fallen on any of them." The apostles at Jerusalem sent Peter and John, who prayed for them and laid their hands on them, "and they received the Holy Spirit." The oddity is the gap: baptism real, something further still to be given, and given by a distinct rite, the imposition of apostolic hands. The Church has always recognized here the origin of Confirmation, the sacrament that completes baptismal grace with the strengthening gift of the Spirit (CCC 1288), and the Catechism gives this exact passage pride of place, quoting it to open the In Brief summary that closes its treatment of the sacrament (CCC 1315), with the effects of Confirmation set out at CCC 1302-1305. Baptism and Confirmation appear in Scripture the way they appear in the Church: distinct, ordered, and both necessary to full Christian initiation.

5. Press the honest question your group is already thinking: why would God withhold the Spirit's descent until two apostles walked up from Jerusalem? Think about what was at stake in this particular city.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Samaria's whole pathology was the rival shrine: same Scriptures, separate mountain, parallel worship, permanent schism. If Samaritan Christianity had begun as a self-contained movement, church history would have opened with a second Gerizim. Luke never states God's reason, so the Church reasons from what God actually did. The most persuasive reading, and the one with the deepest roots in the tradition, is that at this one hinge God visibly bound the new community to the apostolic college: the Spirit fell through Peter and John's hands so that no one, Samaritan or Jew, could doubt that there is one Church, apostolic in its very plumbing. Offer this to the group as the best explanation of the delay, not as something Scripture states outright. The delay is not a defect in Philip's baptism; it is a providential lesson in unity, and the sacrament it displays, hands laid on the baptized to confer the Spirit, is still tied to that apostolic ministry: in the Latin Church the bishop is the ordinary minister of Confirmation, and priests confirm when the law or a faculty provides, as at the initiation of adults and in danger of death, while in the Eastern Catholic Churches the priest ordinarily chrismates with myron blessed by the bishop. Either way the line runs back to Peter and John on that mission to Samaria.

6. Read Acts 8:18-24. What does Simon want, what does he offer, and what does Peter answer? And here is the backhanded question: what does Simon's offer prove he had observed?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Simon offers money for the power to confer the Spirit by laying on hands, and Peter's answer is volcanic: "Your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!" The Church took her word for this sin, simony, from his name (CCC 2121). But notice what the professional wonder-worker's offer concedes: Simon watched the apostles' hands and concluded that something real, objective, and transferable was happening, so real that it was worth capital. Nobody bids on a metaphor. The would-be buyer of apostolic power is its first unintended witness, and a baptized one at that, which is precisely why he stands as a warning to insiders rather than a caricature of outsiders. And note Peter's remedy: repent, and pray for forgiveness, the door left open even for Simon.

7. Read Acts 8:26-31. Assemble the Ethiopian's resume: his office, his devotion, his journey, his book, his activity in the chariot. Is this a careless or ignorant reader? Then weigh his answer to Philip's question.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of all her treasure; devout enough to travel perhaps a thousand miles to worship in Jerusalem; wealthy enough to own an Isaiah scroll and educated enough to read it aloud. He is the best-case private reader of Scripture in the ancient world: sincere, humble, prayerful, literate, and holding the actual text of God's word. And when asked whether he understands what he is reading, this best-case reader answers, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" Inspired Scripture itself records the verdict: even the ideal reader needs a guide. And heaven agrees, because God's response to this man's hunger was not a private flash of illumination; it was to dispatch a guide, by angel and Spirit, from inside the apostolic Church.

Build the steelman. The Reformation doctrine of Scripture's perspicuity deserves its strongest voice, and its strongest voice is a careful one. The classic Reformed confessions do not claim that every passage is equally plain or equally clear to everyone. They claim that everything necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation is set forth so clearly somewhere in Scripture that the unlearned as well as the learned, making due use of the ordinary means and helped by the Holy Spirit, can reach a sufficient understanding of it, and that no infallible magisterium is required for this. Note carefully that ordinary means includes preaching and teachers; the Protestant claim is against an infallible interpreting authority, not against instruction. The Bereans were praised precisely for testing apostolic preaching against the Scriptures for themselves (Acts 17:11). All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17). God's word is a lamp to my feet (Psalm 119:105), not a locked box requiring a Roman key, and history shows what happens when a clerical class controls the Book. If ordinary believers cannot understand the Bible, why did God write it to them? Let that case stand tall before pressing.

8. Press question one. Notice first what the Catholic claim is not, and then let this very scene define what it is. Does Philip take the scroll away from the eunuch, or open it to him? And where does the guided reading immediately lead (8:35-38)?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The Catholic claim has never been that laymen should not read Scripture; the Church begs them to (and question 9 will concede what Catholics must concede). The claim is about the *sufficiency of the solitary reader*, and this scene tests it perfectly. Philip does not confiscate the scroll; he opens it, "beginning with this scripture he told him the good news of Jesus." The guide multiplies the reader's access instead of replacing it. And press the steelman's own concession: if ordinary means are needed, the question is no longer whether a reader needs help but which help God actually authorizes, and in this scene He authorizes a man sent from inside the apostolic Church. And watch where interpretation inside the Church lands: not in a viewpoint but in a sacrament, "See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?" Scripture read with the Church runs down to the water; that is the Catholic rhythm of Word and Sacrament in a single afternoon. Add the apostles' own testimony about the solitary reader: Peter warns that in Paul's letters are things hard to understand, which the untaught twist to their destruction, and that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because prophecy never came by human impulse but from men moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 3:16; 1:20-21). Be precise with that second one: Peter's immediate point is that Scripture's origin is not private, and the Church draws the consequence that a word which did not come privately is not read rightly in private either. Do not present it as a bare prohibition on private reading; the origin clause is what gives it force. The Bereans, for their part, examined the Scriptures *with the apostle Paul preaching in the room*, which is

guided reading, not solo reading; their nobility was eagerness, not independence.

9. Press question two, and make the honest concessions. What must Catholics grant to the Protestant instinct here, and what does the Church actually ask of Catholic readers of Scripture?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Grant freely: Scripture's central message is luminous, and souls have been converted by a Gideon Bible in a motel drawer; God is not handcuffed to catechists. Grant too that Catholics have sometimes lived as if the Bible were clergy property. That is our failure to own, not the Church's teaching. And the Church's own recent teaching runs hard the other way: the Second Vatican Council directed that easy access to Sacred Scripture be provided for all the Christian faithful, and exhorted all Christians to frequent reading of the Scriptures, since in St. Jerome's words "ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ" (Dei Verbum 22, 25). What the Church asks is not less reading but accompanied reading: Scripture within the living Tradition that produced its canon, with the analogy of faith as the guardrail (CCC 112-114). The eunuch's humility, not his scroll ownership, is the model: the reader who asks for a guide is the reader God sends Philip to.

10. Live discovery, and the tenderest one tonight. The eunuch is reading Isaiah 53. Turn just three chapters forward and read Isaiah 56:3-7, remembering Deuteronomy 23:1, which barred eunuchs from the assembly of the Lord. What is this man holding in his hands, and what does his baptism mean?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

If his condition was physical (the word can also denote a court official), Deuteronomy would have excluded him from the assembly, and he may well have met some version of that exclusion in Jerusalem, a worshiper kept at the margins. And the scroll on his lap promises, three chapters past the passage he was puzzling over, that the day is coming when the eunuch who holds fast the covenant will receive in God's house "a monument and a name better than sons and daughters, an everlasting name which shall not be cut off," and the foreigner will be joyful in a house of prayer for all peoples. He is holding his own invitation and cannot read the address until Philip shows him the Host who wrote it. His baptism in roadside water reads as Isaiah 56 coming true: the first man baptized after the Samaritans is a foreign eunuch, the double exclusion doubly welcomed. "And he went on his way rejoicing" (8:39), carrying the Gospel toward the end of the earth, exactly as the map verse promised.

DIG DEEPER: SIMON MAGUS AFTERWARD

Early Christian writers remembered Simon darkly: St. Irenaeus and St. Justin Martyr, himself a Samaritan, describe him as the fountainhead of Gnostic sects, and later legends multiplied around his name. Scripture itself leaves him at Peter's call to repentance and his shaken plea, "Pray for me to the Lord" (8:24), and there the honest reader must leave him too: a baptized man at a crossroads, his ending unrecorded. The certainty he left behind is the word simony and its lesson: grace has no price because it has an infinite one, already paid.

DIG DEEPER: THE ROAD SOUTH

Ancient tradition, reported by Irenaeus and cherished by the Ethiopian church to this day, holds that the eunuch carried the Gospel home and became its first herald in his own land. Ethiopia's Christian roots are among the oldest on earth, and Psalm 68:31 stood over them from the beginning: "Ethiopia shall stretch out her

hands to God." One roadside catechesis, one baptism, one rejoicing traveler: the arithmetic of evangelization has never required large numbers, only obedient guides.

Send (15 minutes)

1. Philip heard a strange prompt, "go to a desert road at noon," and obeyed at a run. What is the nearest thing to a chariot in your life right now, a person or situation you sense a nudge toward and keep explaining away?
2. The eunuch's greatness was a humble question. Where in your faith are you pretending to understand more than you do, and who could you actually ask?

Live It This Week

Two assignments in the spirit of the chariot. First, read guided: take next week's chapter, Acts 9:1-31, and read it once with a Catholic guide at your elbow, the notes of a Catholic study Bible or a trusted Catholic commentary, deliberately practicing accompanied reading. Notice at least one thing the guide showed you that you would have driven past alone. Second, ask a Philip question: once this week, gently ask someone in your life, "What do you actually make of God these days?", and then do what Philip did first in the chariot: listen. You are not assigned to win an argument. You are assigned to sit down beside someone.

Closing Prayer

Father, your Spirit caught up Philip and your providence stationed a chariot on a desert road. Nothing in our week is outside that providence. Seal in us the gift of Confirmation, make us humble enough to ask for guides and generous enough to become them, and let everyone we meet go on their way rejoicing. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

"Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this scripture he told him the good news of Jesus." (Acts 8:35)

Part 3: Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in Session 6, in order of appearance. Flag these before the session.

PRIMARY TEXT

1. Acts 8:4-8 (Philip in Samaria)
2. Acts 8:9-13 (Simon believes)
3. Acts 8:14-17 (the apostles' hands; the Spirit)
4. Acts 8:18-24 (simony)
5. Acts 8:26-40 (the Ethiopian)

OLD TESTAMENT DISCOVERY PASSAGES

6. 2 Kings 17:24-29 (origin of the Samaritans)
7. Isaiah 53:7-8 (the passage in the chariot)
8. Isaiah 56:3-7 (the eunuch's promise)
9. Deuteronomy 23:1 (the old exclusion)
10. Psalm 68:31; Zephaniah 3:10 (Ethiopia foreseen)

NEW TESTAMENT CROSS REFERENCES

11. Acts 8:1 (the scattering); Acts 1:8 (the map)
12. John 4:1-42; John 4:9; John 8:48 (Jesus and Samaria)
13. Acts 17:11 (the Bereans, steelman)
14. 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Psalm 119:105 (steelman)
15. 2 Peter 1:20; 3:16 (hard to understand; twisted)

CHURCH DOCUMENTS

16. CCC 1288; CCC 1315; CCC 112-114; CCC 2121; Dei Verbum 22, 25