

“A Determined Evangelist”
Acts 8:26-40
June 29, 2008

INTRODUCTION:

Acts 8 is significant because it tells the story of the first missionary of the church. Philip leaves his home to go and proclaim the good news of Jesus to people who are very different from him. He engages in cross-cultural ministry to the Samaritans and then to an African man from Ethiopia. It is significant that this missionary work began during a dark time in the life of the church. Luke records for us in the first 3 verses of this chapter three significant setbacks that take place in the church. First, the martyrdom of Stephen marked the beginning of **“a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem”** (v. 1). Second, the apostles are still not going forth in mission, as Jesus had commanded them. Luke tells us that after the persecution broke out, the disciples were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, **“except the apostles.”** Third, a new and powerful enemy had been raised up against the church, a man named Saul. Luke says that he was **“ravaging the church,”** a verb that one commentator said expresses “a brutal and sadistic cruelty.”

In the next three chapters, we are going to see God at work overcoming these very significant enemies to the missionary progress of the church. First, we see in this chapter that the great persecution that scattered the Christians only served to spread the missionaries from their concentrated presence in Jerusalem. Satan thought he was putting out the gospel, but his actions served to fan the flames of the gospel. It's like trying to put out a fire by blowing on it. Chapter 9 is going to show us what God did about that second enemy, when Saul is converted to faith in Jesus. The great persecutor of the church will become the great apostle of the church. Then, chapter 10 will address the reluctance of the apostles to obey Jesus' commission to them to go forth in mission. Peter will be changed by God as he learns to bring the gospel to the Gentile, Cornelius.

Thinking about Philip as the first missionary has brought to my mind other first missionaries. Several years ago, I read about a man whom I think is Alabama's first African-American Presbyterian to serve as a foreign missionary. William Henry Sheppard was born in 1865 in Virginia. He received his training for the ministry at Stillman Institute in Tuscaloosa. He was ordained in Tuscaloosa and then accepted a call to pastor in Montgomery. Then in 1890 he accepted a call to serve as a missionary in the Congo. Lucy Gant, who was a teacher in Tuscaloosa, joined him there shortly and also became Mrs. Sheppard. They ministered in the Kasai region of the Congo. I understand that today there are half a million Presbyterians in this region that trace their origins back to this African-American missionary from Alabama. Philip was that kind of pioneering missionary. There is a great deal we can learn here about missions and outreach.

There are actually two evangelists featured in this passage, a human evangelist and a divine evangelist. Let's look at them both and learn from them.

I. Philip's Faithful Witness

Many modern-day evangelists have airplane stories of sitting beside someone in an airplane and seeing God open a door for speaking to them about the good news of Jesus. This is Philip's airplane story about his encounter with an African man traveling from Jerusalem to Ethiopia. This eunuch was a man of influence in his country, holding a position that is roughly equivalent to our Secretary of the Treasury. He was traveling in the first century version of an airplane. Luke calls it a chariot, but it wasn't the military chariot we're familiar with from the *Ben Hur* movie. It was more like a wagon, because we know from this passage that it could hold at least three people: the Ethiopian, Philip and the driver. At the end of this encounter, the Ethiopian believes and is baptized. I notice three things in our passage that make Philip a good evangelist.

The first thing I notice about Philip is that he follows God's lead, even when he doesn't know where it will lead. God doesn't unfold the entire story to Philip all at once, telling him that by the end of the trip someone from Ethiopia will have been converted. Instead, he leads him in stages, telling him first to take a walk south, into the desert, to the place where the main north-south highway was located. I wonder what Philip thought during the long walk into the desert. He had no idea why God was leading him to that place. It was quite different than his recent evangelism experience in Samaria, a very populated area filled with many towns and villages where Philip had been able to proclaim the gospel. There were no people out here. Then, when he got to this major highway, he sees the chariot in which the Ethiopian is traveling. God then reveals to him the next step. **"Go over and join this chariot"** (v. 29). It's clear from the text that this was a traveling chariot, not a stationary one. So Philip runs alongside it, where he hears the man reading aloud from Isaiah 53. Philip is invited to sit with him as they travel along.

Though God doesn't normally lead us as directly as he led Philip, the Bible teaches that all who are followers of Jesus are led by God's Spirit. **"For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God"** (Ro. 8:14). What this means is that God has placed you where you are. He's put you in the neighborhood where you live, in the job he has given you and in the circle of relationships you have. It may feel to you at times, as was the case with Philip, that you are in a desert place. But there are divine appointments God has for you right where you are, just as he did with Philip. Ask him what those are, and ask him to open those doors for you. There are unique opportunities available to each one of us as we follow the Lord like Philip did.

The second thing I notice about Philip's evangelism is that he started by asking a question. **"Do you understand what you are reading"** (v. 30)? A question is a non-coercive, respectful way to approach another person. Think of evangelism as pushing on a door into someone's life. If the door opens, we can walk in. If the door is locked and tightly shut, it would be wrong to take out the fireman's ax and begin hacking away at the door. The work of evangelism is not highly regarded these days. That is certainly the case outside the church, but also inside the church. I think one of the reasons for this is that Christians have at times been too pushy and disrespectful in the way we go about this. Have you ever had the experience of being approached by an overly pushy salesman? I can remember an experience I had with one in which I finally gave in just to get him off my back. Such coerciveness is at odds with the nature of the gospel as good news to be received. So we approach people like Philip did, boldly asking questions and pushing on doors, but never crossing the line into coercion or manipulation.

A third thing we learn from Philip's example is to be content-centered on the word of God. Did you notice that Philip's question addresses the understanding? **"Do you understand what you are reading?"** The eunuch had been reading Isaiah 53, and Philip knows that faith comes by hearing the word of God, and that the word must be understood before it can be believed. Evangelism must address the will, but it must first address the mind. That's why Christian missions and Bible translation and literacy have always gone hand in hand.

Illustration: One of the great missionaries in early American history was a man by the name of John Eliot. He came to Massachusetts in 1631 and for years did all he could to reach the Algonquin Indians who were at that time native to Massachusetts. One of his many labors on their behalf was to translate the Bible into their language. I understand that there is a Scriptorium in Grand Haven, Michigan that has a copy of Eliot's Algonquin Bible. It was the first Bible printed in America. No one alive can read that Bible today because there are no Algonquin Indians left. He also produced a grammar for that language and taught the Indians to read. It was an amazing effort, one that was born out of this conviction of the essential importance of understanding the Bible in order to come to faith in Christ.

II. God's Zealous Determination

As much as we can learn from Philip's example about good evangelistic practices, the real determined evangelist of this story is God, not Philip. The real point of this story is God's determination to fulfill his plan to reach the nations with the gospel. The apostles are staying in Jerusalem and not going out with the gospel like Jesus had commanded them. God will not be denied, so he sends someone else. And he reaches someone from the remotest part of the world. Ethiopia was viewed in this day as the end of the world. It was beyond the reach

of the Roman Empire. It was south of Egypt and was spread over what is today the countries of the Sudan and Ethiopia. There are a number of things God is doing to spread the gospel. Let me point out two of them.

God had been working in the Ethiopian man's life long before Philip met him. We see two indications of that in our passage. First, he had been to Jerusalem to worship. God had put in this man's heart a spiritual thirst that led him to make the long journey to Jerusalem and back. He was a Gentile who found himself drawn to the God of Israel. It will be interesting one day to ask this man where he first heard of Jehovah, Israel's God. We don't know the answer to that now, but we do know that God had worked in his heart to produce such an interest. The second indication that God had been working is that the Ethiopian had managed somehow to find a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. And it just so happened that at the precise moment Philip approached him that he was reading in the one Old Testament passage that speaks most clearly about the work of Christ on the cross, Isaiah 53. God had engineered that.

This has significant application to us in our evangelism. It teaches us that conversion is a process that takes time, and God is the one who oversees the necessary work. Philip had done nothing to prepare this man; he only shows up after God has been working for probably several years. This is the normal way conversion takes place. One of the ways the Bible speaks of coming to faith in Christ is to be born again. The birth process doesn't happen immediately. In the case of humans, it takes a gestational period of nine months. Jerram Barrs says that in France and Japan, the average time it takes for someone to become a Christian after their first serious contact with a believer is ten years. In Britain right now, it takes between four and five years. In the United States, it really depends on where someone lives, but it could take anywhere from a few months for someone who has already had a great deal of exposure to true Christianity, to several years for someone who hasn't. And we need to be patient and wait on God to work in these situations. But we also need to believe that he is at work.

A second thing I see God doing is showing the heart of the gospel as good news to the outcast by choosing to reach this particular man. "Gospel" means good news, and the verb "evangelize," which Luke uses several times in this passage, means to announce good news. This man was a eunuch. It was customary in ancient times for those who had close contact with the queen to be made eunuchs in order to serve her. That was the case with this man. His status as a eunuch becomes ironic when we remember that the Old Testament said that eunuchs were not allowed to enter the assembly of the Lord (Deut. 23:1). That means that he would not be welcome in the temple. This man in some way had been drawn to the God of the Jews and wanted to come and worship Jehovah. So he makes this long, difficult journey only to arrive in Jerusalem and be told that he is not permitted to enter the temple. He is now returning home with that rejection stinging his heart. It must seem to him that the God he's been seeking doesn't want him. Then he receives a fuller revelation of that God in Jesus. Philip

explains to him the good news of the death of Christ as it is spoken of in Isaiah 53, the passage that he had been reading. He died the death of an outsider in order that people like the eunuch, outsiders by nature, could be made insiders. We have all felt the sting of social exclusion from time to time, that sense that we just don't belong and aren't really welcome by a particular group. How much worse is it to come to see that sinners like us aren't welcome into the holy presence of God! Philip was able to explain to him the meaning of these words from Isaiah 53:6, **"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."** One of the results of our sins being laid on Jesus is found three chapters later. **"And let not the eunuch say, 'Behold, I am a dry tree.' For thus says the Lord; 'To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off'"** (Is. 56:3-5).

This is incredibly good news. In the gospel, we are both forgiven and accepted. We are given both cleansing and a new status. No wonder the eunuch wanted to stop at the first pool of water he saw. He wanted to be baptized and receive this symbol that said he was cleansed and accepted. You see, the gospel is good news. When we declare its truths, we are giving good news. Sin has made us irreversibly defective. Have you ever stood before your own defectiveness with despair in your heart? Just as the eunuch was unable to reverse his deformity, so you and I stand powerless in the face of our many defects. But Jesus makes us whole. In him, outsiders become insiders.

Believing these two points will transform our evangelism. If we believe that God is at work in people's lives, we will be gentle with people as we wait on God's work. And as we believe that the gospel is good news, we will be bold in sharing it with others. This quality of a humble boldness needs to mark our witness.

CONCLUSION:

I did a little research this week to see what happened after the conversion of this man. One thing we know is that the first Gentile convert was an African, not a European. The gospel came to Africa before it came to Europe. Christianity developed early in Ethiopia, before Constantine converted in the 4th century. According to David Calhoun, the first coin to have an explicitly Christian symbol came from Ethiopia. It was a small silver coin with an inlaid gold cross. There is a continuing Christian church in Ethiopia today.

As we celebrate communion today, notice how eager the eunuch was to partake of the sacrament of baptism. May God make us eager to celebrate communion, knowing that we all are outsiders by nature, but God includes us by his grace.