

Text: Acts 8:26-40

Title: Philip Evangelizes the Ethiopian Official

Truth: God has directed us to evangelize those we encounter.

Date/Location: Sunday evening 9/2/2012; rev. 11/8/2023

Introduction

In the book of Acts, Luke records accounts of key individuals being converted. The “preacher” in these accounts is sometimes unknown to us and the account is very brief (Acts 11:19). The impact of some of these evangelistic encounters is not recorded either. Luke gives more detail in this case.

The text tells us that Philip was having fruitful ministry at this time in Samaria (see 8:4-13). Why would God call him away? The simplest explanation is that the Christian ministry would continue with other believers. There was additional territory, an entire country in fact, needing the gospel. Once the gospel is present in a location, God calls certain of his ministers to move on to plant in new fields. Other servants He is pleased to have stay in a location for a length of time.

I. The Main Characters, v. 26-29

A. Philip. The Lord delivered special revelation to Philip. In the book of Acts there are a few occasions where God gives special revelation to a seeker or to His servant. On “average” throughout world history, that is so rare as to be non-existent. In the present age, God does not give special revelation to people, despite stories of people who have dreams about Jesus or about a particular calling to a place. If God is working in the heart of someone to be saved, He will also provide the needed revelation for that person to be saved. That happens providentially, through the diligent efforts of individual believers and churches to give tracts, share the gospel, do Bible studies, translate the Bible, distribute the Bible, etc. If God wishes for a person to evangelize a particular individual or place, He will see to it—providentially—that the person gives thought to the need and goes about meeting that need.

B. Ethiopian Official. The official was a God-fearer, someone who went up to Jerusalem to worship. It does not seem he was a full convert to the Jewish faith because he likely could not regularly visit Jerusalem to offer sacrifices there. He read the Scriptures. This is easy to gloss over, as if he were reading his King James Study Bible or something. He *possessed a copy of the prophet Isaiah*. That is amazing. That would have been hard to acquire, and very expensive.

II. The Bible Study, v. 28, 30-35

- A. Passage – Isaiah 53:7-8 – read in context. **Application:** you must have the Bible. Start with the Bible. Get the Bible into people’s hands and get them reading it.
- B. Understanding is the key to reading. The official is concerned that he cannot understand unless someone guides him. He has the textbook, but no teacher. He does not have the Holy Spirit yet; God has ordained that a person would be the initial teacher.

Application: when you read Scripture, you must go for understanding. You cannot simply pass your eyes over the text!

- C. Teaching = Evangelism in this case. Preaching Christ beginning from that passage; perhaps moving both forward and backward from there to fill in the gaps of the official’s understanding.

This is not a text that says, “you can go from any OT text to Christ.” From some OT texts you would be making quite a leap to get from the text to Jesus. Here, the very meaning of the text refers to the Messiah, so it is no leap to preach Christ. Other OT texts would not permit such an easy transition.

- D. **Application:** most Christians, with some basic training, could do the kind of thing that Philip did here. You can offer to have a Bible reading and study time in your home, or at work at lunch, or in your neighbor’s home. If God is leading you to do that, and would like some support, please ask myself or Jansen. We can help prepare you, pray for you, etc. You do not have to be seminary trained, have a Bible college degree, or be a Christian for 25 years before you can do this! You can share what you know, and what you can find out if you do not know already.

Maybe invite your adult son or daughter, or niece or nephew, or co-worker, or new church attender for a meal and Bible reading. Ask them if they have read the Bible or have questions. Perhaps they are like the Ethiopian here, “Of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?” “How can I [understand], unless someone guides me?”

III. The Baptism, v. 36-39

- A. Ethiopian asks the question about baptism. This shows desire of heart; it also shows what Philip was teaching him along the journey.

B. Verse 37 has a major transmission issue in the history of the text. New translations omit verse 37. Because the texts we call NU (Nestle-Aland) and M (majority text) omit the verse, it appears to me that it is not original. (If one or the other of those texts omit the verse, I am not able to be as certain. In this case, some western and Latin texts do contain the verse, which muddies the water some.) Even so, this does not change the fact that the verse is accurate, i.e., you must believe before being baptized. We know that from many other passages in Scripture, so it is unnecessary to repeat here. Also, we know that Philip, being a Biblical evangelist, would not baptize the official unless he thought his profession of faith was credible.

This passage shows a believing person being baptized by immersion upon their profession of faith. Baptism is clearly *not* for those people who do not profess faith. It therefore cannot be for infants.

C. The Baptism itself. They went “down into the water.” This clearly implies the mode of baptism was immersion. Sprinkling, as pictured in a famous painting of the incident, is completely unrealistic in this situation.

There was no church to observe this baptism because it was a first of its kind, a seed starting a new work. The usual case is to baptize in conjunction with a church. Also, this was not a private baptism. We gather that because he was a man of *great authority* and would have traveled with a several attendants. He had at least a chariot driver and probably others as well. The retinue of the official was present as witnesses. My point here is that baptisms should not occur privately. They are events that should be witnessed by other believers, and by non-believers as well.

IV. Aftermath, v. 39-40

- A. Philip leaves – miraculously. The Spirit of God whisked him away from Gaza to a city called Azotus, also known as Ashdod. It was about 15 miles away. It seems incredible, but it is nothing for the omnipotent God.
- B. The Ethiopian man experienced great joy. He was happy to be forgiven, to be baptized as a testimony to his belief, to understand the passage of the Bible he was reading after Philip explained it to him. It seems highly likely that he would have taken this joy and gospel news with him and shared it with others. His office may have given him a larger-than-average reach in the country.

Do you know who else was happy? Philip most certainly was. But also, the residents of heaven: There is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:7). See also Isaiah 49:13.

In this case, we do not have a Biblical record of the impact of Philip’s evangelism of the Ethiopian official. What happened in Ethiopia after this? Secular history starts to recognize Christianity in Ethiopia long after this official returned to his home country. The next three paragraphs give some details:¹

Christianity in Ethiopia is the country's largest religion with members making up 68% of the population.

Christianity in Ethiopia dates back to the ancient Kingdom of Aksum, when the King Ezana first adopted the faith in the 4th century AD. This makes Ethiopia one of the first regions in the world to officially adopt Christianity.

Various Christian denominations are now followed in the country. Of these, the largest and oldest is the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church an Oriental Orthodox church centered in Ethiopia. The Orthodox Tewahedo Church was part of the Coptic Orthodox Church until 1959 when it was granted its own patriarch by Coptic Orthodox Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of All Africa Cyril VI.

Tradition says that the man’s name was Simeon Bachos the Eunuch. This is not important for our study, but it does remind us that we are reading about a real person, not just a character in a fictional story.

Conclusion

Remove the miraculous and direct revelation elements from this account, and you have a story that that we should be replicating in our lives.

MAP

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_in_Ethiopia. See also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethiopian_eunuch.