



The Holy Spirit's Leading in Evangelism (Acts 8:26-40)

Commentary: Week Sixteen

***Scripture divisions used in our series and various commentaries differ from each other.
This is the reason for the occasional discrepancy between
the verse range listed in our series and the commentary notes provided in our Scripture Studies.*

New American Commentary¹

(2) The Witness to the Ethiopian Treasurer [8:26-40](#)

Having established the mission to the Samaritans, Philip then became involved in an even more far-reaching missionary breakthrough, as he was led to witness to an Ethiopian. Indeed, Philip's witness to the eunuch may be considered the first conversion of a Gentile and in many ways parallels the story of Cornelius in chap. [10](#). Ethiopia was considered "the end of the earth" by the Greeks and Romans, and Philip's witness to the Samaritans and the Ethiopian comprises a "foretaste" of the completion of Christ's commission ([1:8](#)) by the whole church in the subsequent chapters of Acts.

A pronounced emphasis is on the activity of the Spirit in this passage. In fact, chaps. [8-10](#) witness an ever-increasing degree of the Spirit's involvement. It has already been seen in the "Samaritan Pentecost" ([8:17](#)). It is more pronounced still in Philip's conversion of the eunuch. Paul's conversion is depicted as totally due to God's activity apart from human agency ([9:1-30](#)). Finally, the conversion of Cornelius and his fellow Gentiles caps the picture and emphasizes God's activity more thoroughly than any of the preceding narratives. All of these conversion stories mark major advances in the Christian mission, and the heightened emphasis on the Spirit underlines that all the initiative lies ultimately with God, even through a variety of means. The story of Philip and the eunuch falls into three natural parts: the preparation (vv. [26-29](#)), the witness (vv. [30-35](#)), and the commitment (vv. [36-40](#)).

THE PREPARATION ([8:26-29](#)). God's initiative in this story is unquestionable. An angel of the Lord came to Philip in a vision and called him to witness in a most unlikely place. The angel was God's mouthpiece and was the functional equivalent to the Spirit, who continued to lead Philip throughout the story (vv. [29, 39](#)).

[8:26](#) The place of witness was the road to the south of Jerusalem that leads to Gaza, the last watering place before the desert on the route to Egypt. Obeying the divine directive, Philip started out and on his way encountered an unusual prospect for witness. He was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, an official in charge of the queen's treasury (v. [27](#)). The Ethiopia referred to is in all probability the ancient kingdom of Meroe, the ancient Nubian empire that lay south of Aswan between the first and sixth cataracts of the Nile. It is not to be confused with modern Ethiopia, or Abyssinia, which is in the hill country to the east of the upper Nile. The ancient kingdom of Meroe was a flourishing culture from the eighth century B.C. until the fourth century A.D. Referred to in the Old Testament as the Kingdom of Cush, its population consisted of blacks. This remote, advanced culture was an object of endless curiosity for the Greeks and

1. John B. Polhill, *New American Commentary – Volume 26: Acts*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 220-228.

Romans and represented for them the extreme limits of the civilized world. Their kings were viewed as incarnations of the sun god and held a primarily ceremonial role. The real administration of the kingdom was in the hands of powerful queen mothers who had the title of “the Candace.”

8:27 In modern terminology the Ethiopian whom Philip encountered would perhaps be called the Minister of Finance. Whether he was an actual physical eunuch is not certain. In the ancient world slaves were often castrated as boys in order to be used as keepers of the harem and the treasury. Eunuchs were found to be particularly trustworthy and loyal to their rulers. So widespread was the practice of placing them over the treasury that in time the term “eunuch” became a synonym for “treasurer” and did not necessarily imply that the one bearing the title was castrated. In the present passage it is likely that Philip’s Ethiopian was an actual physical eunuch, however, since the terms “eunuch” and “official over the treasury” are both given. His physical status was then highly significant for the story. He had been on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and was in all probability, like Cornelius, one of those “God-fearing” Gentiles who believed in the God of Israel but had not become a proselyte, a full convert, to Judaism. In his case, as a eunuch, full membership in the congregation of Israel was not even possible because of his physical blemish (cf. [Deut 23:1](#)). He could visit the temple in Jerusalem, as he had done; but he could never enter it.

8:28–29 Probably not by accident, the eunuch was reading from a scroll of the prophet Isaiah as his carriage lumbered slowly homeward (v. [28](#)). In all the Old Testament, Isaiah holds forth the greatest hope for the eunuch in his picture of God’s ideal future, a future that promises them a monument in God’s house, a name better than sons and daughters, an “everlasting name which will not be cut off” ([Isa 56:3–8](#)). Little did the eunuch know that he was about to experience the fulfillment of those promises. And little did Philip know his own role in their fulfillment. He probably was still wondering why in the world God had sent him to this lonely place, and perhaps he was a bit bemused by the strange spectacle of the carriage plodding in front of him with its exotic passenger and retinue of servants. Philip had to be prodded by the Spirit: “Go to that chariot and stay near it” (v. [29](#)). Philip had no idea what he should do. The Spirit assumed the lead all the way.

THE WITNESS ([8:30–35](#)).

8:30–31a Complying with the Spirit’s directions, Philip ran up to the slow-moving wagon and began to trot alongside it. He heard the Ethiopian as he read aloud from the text of Isaiah (v. [30](#)). There was nothing unusual about this. The letters on ancient manuscripts were often crowded and difficult to decipher, and reading aloud was the customary manner in that day. Philip’s question to the eunuch contains a play on words that is not reproducible in English: “Do you understand [*ginōskeis*] what you are reading [*anaginōskeis*]?” “How can I ... unless someone explains it to me?” replied the eunuch (v. [31](#)). His response enunciates a basic principle that runs throughout Luke-Acts concerning the interpretation of the Old Testament prophetic texts—the need for a Christian interpreter. The disciples themselves had needed such guidance, and Christ had “opened ... the Scriptures” for them ([Luke 24:45](#)). They in turn sought to explain the Scripture in light of Christ to the Jews in Jerusalem. How indeed would this Gentile pilgrim from a distant land understand the real meaning of Isaiah’s servant psalms without a guide?

8:31b–33 Responding to the eunuch’s invitation, Philip mounted the wagon and sat down beside him. Luke produced the text from which he had been reading, the Septuagintal translation of [Isa 53:7–8](#). The passage is one of the most difficult texts to interpret of all the servant psalms and even more obscure in the Greek than the Hebrew. In general, however, it depicts the basic pattern of the suffering, humiliation, and exaltation of Christ. The picture of the slaughtered lamb evokes the image of Jesus’ crucifixion, the lamb before his shearers, that of Jesus’ silence before his accusers. The deprivation of justice reminds one of the false accusations of blasphemy leveled at Christ and the equivocation of Pilate. But what does “who can speak of his descendants?” mean—that his life was cut off short or perhaps the opposite, that

the tragedy of his death had been followed by a whole host of disciples who had come to believe and trust in him? In addition to the silent suffering and humiliation, the question concerning descendants likely was a point of identification that attracted the eunuch to this text. There is no question what the final phrase would mean to a Christian like Philip. When Christ's life was taken from the earth, it was taken up in the glory of the resurrection, exalted to the right hand of God.

[8:34–35](#) [Isaiah 53:7–8](#) was not the whole story, just the starting place for Philip as he “opened the Scriptures” about Christ to his Ethiopian inquirer. The Ethiopian's question was extremely intelligent and not a little informed: “Who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” (v. [34](#)). Contemporary Jews debated about whether the prophet was speaking of his own suffering or of that of the nation as a whole or of the Messiah. One cannot doubt how Philip answered him. What we would like to know is what other texts Philip shared with him. Perhaps we have them already, in the many scriptural proofs in Peter's speeches earlier in Acts. Most striking of all, of course, is that the eunuch was reading from the servant psalms of Isaiah, the Old Testament texts that point most clearly to the suffering death of Christ. What a perfect introduction for Philip to share the gospel! This was surely no mere coincidence. It is further evidence of the Spirit's activity in the whole incident.

THE COMMITMENT ([8:36–40](#)).

[8:36](#) Philip had shared the gospel with the Ethiopian treasurer and had surely ended on a note of invitation and commitment. The wagon passed a pool of water, and the Ethiopian was ready. “Is there anything to prevent my being baptized *right now*?” (author's paraphrase). Many have sought to determine the exact site of the spring in question, but surely the more significant consideration is that at precisely the critical time they came to water, there along the arid route they were traveling (cf. v. [26](#)). The coincidences are too numerous to be coincidences. The Spirit was in *all* of this. Significance has often been seen in the verb “hinder/prevent” which the eunuch employed when asking if there was any reason why he should not be baptized (*kōlyō*, v. [36](#)). Some see this as part of an early Christian baptismal formula uttered before the baptism of new candidates: “Is there anything to hinder their being baptized?” Surely F. Stagg's view is more on target. The verb indicates that barriers have been removed, hindrances to the spread of the gospel to all people. In this case a double barrier of both physical and racial prejudice had fallen. A eunuch, a Gentile, a black, was baptized and received into full membership in the people of Jesus Christ.

[[8:37](#)] Verse [37](#) is omitted from the NIV text of Acts, and for good reasons. It is not found in the early manuscripts of Acts and seems to be a later scribal addition. It is given in a footnote of the NIV and consists of a profession of faith on the part of the eunuch. Evidently a scribe felt this was lacking and so provided the missing confession of faith. He did not need to do so. Luke had summarized Philip's sharing the gospel with the eunuch in v. [35](#), and one can assume it included an appeal for the eunuch to respond. The eunuch's desire for baptism would indicate a favorable response to Philip's appeal. The added verse, however, has considerable value. It seems to embody a very early Christian baptismal confession where the one baptizing asked the candidate if he believed in Christ with all his heart, to which the candidate would respond by confessing Jesus Christ as the Son of God. This old confession is of real significance to the history of early Christian confessions and would be appropriate to the baptismal ceremony today. To that extent we can be grateful to the pious scribe who ascribed to the eunuch the baptismal confession of his own day.

[8:38–39](#) Verse [38](#) relates the baptism of the Ethiopian treasurer. Since the verb employed is *baptizō*, which always carried the idea of total submersion, there is no reason to assume that the eunuch was baptized in any other way than the consistent New Testament pattern of immersion. When the two emerged from the water, they departed in opposite directions. Philip disappeared, being snatched up by the Spirit, much like the prophet Elijah ([1 Kgs 18:12](#); [2 Kgs 2:16](#)). The Spirit had led him to this encounter. Now, the witness completed, the Spirit closed the scene and transported Philip to further

witness in the coastal cities to the north. The eunuch continued southward on his long journey home. Somehow it did not now seem so arduous. He was filled with joy, a genuine manifestation of the Spirit's work in his life.

Summary.

Many interpreters have seen parallels in this story to various Old Testament traditions. Many of the same places occur in [Zeph 2](#)—Ethiopia, which is identical with Cush ([Zeph 2:12](#); [3:10](#)) and the Philistine cities of Gaza and Ashdod, which is identical with Azotus ([2:4](#)). The strong picture of Philip's control by the Spirit reminds one of Elijah. The most interesting correspondences, however, are to be found in the Emmaus story of [Luke 24:13–32](#)—the presence of travelers, the sudden appearances of Jesus and Philip, the opening of the Scriptures to a new understanding of Christ ([Luke 24:27](#); [Acts 8:35](#)), and the disappearance of Jesus in the breaking of bread and of Philip on completion of the baptism. The differences are too great to argue that Luke based either story on the other, but perhaps he saw a pattern of common witness to strangers in the stories, with Philip very much following the example of his master in witness through the interpretation of Scripture. Whatever one makes of such parallels, they do not comprise the main point of the story. The main point is the remarkable missionary advance taken in the conversion of the Ethiopian. Even were he a “God-fearer,” the witness was still to a *Gentile* and in this instance a Gentile who was not eligible for full proselyte status within Judaism because of his physical status as a eunuch. It was a radical step for a Jew, even for a Hellenist Jew like Philip. Still, Philip was not the radical. The *Spirit* was the radical. Philip's openness to the Spirit's leading enabled this major progress toward fulfilling Christ's commission for a worldwide gospel.

What became of the Ethiopian eunuch? Later church fathers relate that he became a missionary to Ethiopia. Such traditions are often legendary and should not be accepted uncritically. More certain evidence dates the evangelization of the Nubian area as beginning in the fourth century. Archaeology has uncovered a flourishing Christian community there between the fifth and tenth centuries. One is tempted to see the converted treasurer as at least planting the seed. It is in any event of interest to note that the first converted Christian “foreigner” in Acts was an African, and one could say that the mission began there, long before Paul ever took it to European soil.

[8:40](#) Verse [40](#) concludes the story of Philip's missionary activity. He appeared in Azotus, Old Testament Ashdod, and traveled about, preaching in the coastal cities. Finally arriving at Caesarea, he seems to have settled there. In Caesarea he appeared in Acts on the occasion of Paul's visit with him ([Acts 21:8](#)) some twenty years or so after the events of chap. [8](#). We are told that at the time he had four unmarried daughters who all prophesied ([21:9](#)). Like their father, evidently they were open to the Spirit. All in all, Philip's accomplishments had been considerable. He had pioneered the Samaritan mission. He had paved the way for the Gentile mission. Peter would later follow him in this with the conversion of Cornelius—interestingly in Caesarea—just as Peter followed him in Samaria. Peter was instrumental in securing community endorsement of the new missionary efforts, but Philip stood in the background as the Hellenist who first caught the vision.