

Lessons from an Evangelist
Acts 8:26-40

Accurate interpretation of any individual story in Acts (or most any other book in the Bible) requires that the passage be read in the light of the overall theme and development of the entire book. While this is often not possible to explicate in a one-off topical sermon, the devotional format provides more space, and so we begin here, before extrapolating lessons on evangelism from 8:26-40.

Acts covers roughly the first 30 years of early Church history, from its founding in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, until Paul's imprisonment in Rome. More important than the mere time lapse is a massive change in church size and culture. What started as a tiny movement from backwoods Galilee eventually penetrated the capital city of the greatest empire on earth. What began as a tiny Jewish sect became a worldwide, predominately Gentile movement. These shifts were monumental. Luke takes pains to demonstrate that these transformations were driven by God, not by man: God is opening his kingdom to the entire world, and calls his people to reach out to all those of all religions, cultures, and ethnicities.

Day 1: Acts 8:26-40 Jesus launches a mission

Even after the resurrection, Jesus' followers are still mired in typical Jewish chauvinism. They ask him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (1:6). Jesus replies that the kingdom does not draw all nations to Jerusalem in worship, but impels the disciples out of Jerusalem in evangelism: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (1:8). The geographical and cultural spread of the gospel from Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth is the focus for the remainder of the book.

By the time we reach Acts 8, the early Christians have received power, and they have been witnesses in Jerusalem, but they have yet to penetrate Judea and Samaria, let alone the ends of the earth. Only when God sends persecution do they scatter throughout Judea and Samaria (8:1). Yet, while it takes them some time to get on board with God's plan, once they start moving, they preach the gospel wherever they go (8:4). Philip is particularly notable, preaching the first recorded sermon to Samaritans (8:4-8), and then to the treasury secretary from Ethiopia (or Sudan),

considered by some ancients to be the 'end of the earth' (8:26-40). This account – along with the entire book of Acts – demonstrates that the transformation from a small, provincial Jewish sect in Galilee, into a world-wide movement comprised of people from a wide range of ethnicities and cultures, is the act of God, often pulling along his uncomprehending people in his wake. Acts in general – and 8:26-40 in particular – remind us that God's purposes do not stop with us, with our church, or with our country, but extend across the world, especially to areas where the name of Jesus is not yet known or loved. Above all else, this account reminds us to support those engaged in the spread of the gospel among unreached peoples.

Day 2: Acts 8:26-29 Divine appointments

One feature of this account is obvious, though its application is ambiguous. God particularly chooses and directs Philip and the foreign finance minister to this meeting. The encounter is so unlikely that it never would have happened without direct divine intervention: (a) an angel of the Lord speaks to Philip, (b) the angel tells him precisely where to go and how to get there, (c) there Philip encounters the visiting official.

Such divine appointments still happen today. Fifty years or more ago, a missionary friend in India was headed into the local city. He sensed God's leading to take a different route to town, and to take evangelistic tracts featuring the story of a condemned prisoner who came to faith before his execution. As this missionary walked into town, he encountered an armed police escort, taking a prisoner to jail. My friend passed over the evangelistic materials to the guards, who promised to read them to the illiterate prisoner as they took him to jail.

How often should we expect this sort of thing? This type of account occurs at least three times in Acts (here, the conversion of Cornelius, the conversion of Paul). Then again, Acts covers 30 years. And the only occasions that Luke records such leading are major transitions in the spread of the gospel. So Scripture prompts us to suppose both that such prearranged divine appointments may occur in our lives today, though such dramatic ones are likely infrequent. Mostly, we go about our business in routine fashion, and respond to opportunities when and as they present themselves. Even then, it is worth noting that encounters which seem to us random are still divinely arranged, even if they may not seem particularly significant at the time. So, we do well to be attentive to divine appointments, opportunities to speak or act on Jesus' behalf.

Day 3: Acts 8:26-29 One by one

Another feature of this divine appointment deserves attention. Sometimes God works through important people: it was Peter who preached at the first-ever evangelistic rally (Acts 2:14). Sometimes God works by the thousands: at Pentecost, three thousand came to faith (Acts 2:41). Other times – perhaps most other times – he works through ‘everyman’ to reach people one at a time. Here God uses a second-tier Christian leader, Philip, to reach this admittedly important government official, but someone we never hear from again. In the next chapter he uses a simple disciple in Damascus, Ananias, as a mentor for the new convert Paul (Acts 9:10-19). So the kingdom advances one by one, often through the efforts of seemingly inconsequential people.

God still commonly works this way today, not just by elite reaching elite in massive numbers, but by common people speaking simple words and performing everyday deeds. Today, offer yourself to God for his use; ask him to use you to touch others, even in small, incremental ways.

Day 4: Acts 8:26-31 One step at a time

A common maxim proposes that God generally does not show us the end of the path, but merely lights up the next step. We see support for that maxim here. First, an angel tells Philip to leave town, via a certain road, with no indication why (8:26). Philip obeys (8:27). Only after starting out does he encounter the Ethiopian official, and receive the next step’s direction from God: “Go to that chariot” (8:29). Again Phillip obeys (8:30). Only then does he learn the purpose of the encounter, as he finds the man reading the Bible, and has an opportunity to share the gospel with him (8:30-31). Had he not first obeyed twice – even without knowing what God had in store for him – he would not have had the opportunity to share the gospel with this foreign dignitary.

Application of this text raises a crucial question: How do we distinguish divine promptings from our own musings? There is no simple or easy answer to this question, even after many years’ experience in the faith. And we do well to be wary of those who claim direct divine leading: the faith of many has shipwrecked by following those who claim special leading for seemingly absurd undertakings. But at the very least, we obey what we currently know, following the teachings of Scripture and pursuing the priorities of God, one step at a time, until he sheds light on our next step.

Day 5: Acts 8:26-31 God prepares the soil

As spring approaches, gardeners anticipate the melting of snow, when they can prepare the ground for sowing. Unless the ground is prepared, the seed will not sprout, let alone produce a harvest. Similarly, with evangelism, here we see that God has already tilled the heart of the Ethiopian official: he is returning from worship in Jerusalem; he is reading from the Servant Song in Isaiah, perhaps the most explicit Old Testament prophecy about Christ. There is no better prepared soil than someone who is already seeking God and reading the Bible, especially Isaiah 53.

Many Christians are reluctant to evangelize today because they measure success only when someone actually prays to receive Christ, and they do not often manage to bring someone to that point in a single encounter. But, as this account demonstrates, and as gardening illustrates, crops are not typically harvested on the first day the seed is sown. Instead, God works through an extended process of soil preparation, sowing, and watering, until harvest. Our role in any single encounter is to be God's instrument, bringing the person one step closer to God. And when we do harvest, we are typically the last step in a long process, and cannot claim sole credit.

Day 6: Acts 8:32-40 An evangelistic conversation

The conversation between the Ethiopian official and Philip illustrates at least three principles of evangelistic presentations. First, had Philip not been familiar with Isaiah 53, he would have been at a loss here (8:32-35). Secondly, the Ethiopian responds to the presentation with a decision to follow Christ. Thirdly, he confirms his faith through baptism (8:36-39).

So, today, it should be our ambition to lead people to Christ. But if we are to realize that ambition, some training is essential: we need to be familiar with summary presentations of the gospel, and with answers to common objections. Secondly, whenever possible, we not only include information about Christ, but also an invitation to decision. And, finally, we guide new converts into baptism, as a confirmation of their newfound faith. The first step toward these goals is to be praying for someone you know, and for the opportunity to share the gospel with them.