

Acts 8: The Adventures of Philip, or the Church Crossing Boundaries

1. If our church moved to a new location, it's hard to image the clergy staying behind and trusting the laity to run the church and spread the gospel. Why, in 8:1, did the apostles remain in Jerusalem? And why then did they Peter and John go to Samaria when they heard of Philip's success (cf. 15)?
2. The gospel spreads in Acts 8 as God works signs and wonders through Philip. Surprisingly, another miracle worker is on hand, and is already a crowd favorite—a potentially disastrous situation for Philip. Luke draws several parallels between the two:¹

Simon the sorcerer	Philip the evangelist
Simon works wonders (8:11)	Philip works wonders (8:6, 13)
Simon draws crowds (8:9-10)	Philip draws crowds (8:6-7)
Simon is “listened to eagerly” by the people (8:10-11)	Philip is “listened to eagerly” by the people (8:6)
Simon is regarded as a “great power” [<i>dynamis</i>] (8:10)	Philip performs “great powers” [<i>dynamis</i>] (8:13)
Simon “amazes” Samaritans with his claims and magic (8:9, 11)	Philip’s miracles “amaze” the Samaritans (8:13)

Where does this parallel end? How does this not end up as a popularity contest? What does this say about signs and wonders as a way to spread the gospel?

3. “Despite 2:38 [where the Spirit comes on believers at baptism], the Spirit falls *before* (10:44), *some time after* (8:16-17), and sometimes *very soon after* (19:5-6) baptism.”² Why the gap here (16)?
4. Conversion to Judaism required circumcision and baptism.³ Read Deut 23:1; Isaiah 56:4-5. How do these inform the eunuch’s question in 37?
5. In this chapter, the gospel crosses several new boundaries: (a) racial; (b) Jew to Samaritan; and (c) Jew to gentile⁴. Lamin Sanneh, African professor at Yale, noted⁵ that Christianity is unlike all other world religions in that it is not concentrated in or near the land of its birth. E.g., 96% of Muslims live in the Middle East, and surrounding areas of Africa and South Asia; and in the rest of the world there’s only 4%; 88% of Buddhists live in east Asia; 98% of Hindus live in India or south Asia.

¹ For other power contests, see Acts 13:6-11; 16:16-24; 19:13-16; Exod 7:10-12; 1 Kings 18:21-40.

² Keener’s smaller Acts commentary, 265. Keener adds, “Conversion initiates believers into the life of the Spirit (2:38-39), but does not automatically confer all the *experiences* that this new life entails. The lack of experience here, however, concerns the apostles; it is not the ideal.”

³ “It is not certain when Jewish proselyte baptism began, some arguing that it began at the same time as the Christian rite (McKnight) and others that it preceded the Christian rite (Beaseley-Murray).” [*DJG*, under baptism]

⁴ While Luke doesn’t tell us the religious background of the eunuch, it’s possible his possession of an Isaiah scroll shows he was a god-fearer. As a eunuch, he was not eligible to be a proselyte.

⁵ *Whose Religion is Christianity*. References, quotes, and numbers are taken from Tim Keller’s sermon on Acts 8, “The gospel to the African.”

Sanneh points out the situation is completely different for Christians. 25% of Christians are in the Caribbean and central and south America; 22% in Africa; 15% in Asia (and this is growing quickly); 12% in North American; and ~20% in Europe. Richard Bauckham writes, "Almost certainly, Christianity exhibits more cultural diversity than any other religion, and that must say something about it." What distinct quality of the gospel of Jesus allows this?

6. Acts 8 also sees the gospel reach, for the first time, a person of altered, non-binary sexuality. The eunuch was likely castrated prior to puberty. Castration was used to ensure that high-ranking officials were able to safely serve the royal family without risk of intermarriage⁶. As treasurer, he occupied a position of significant power in the court of Candace. Without indulging in reductionism, how might we see a parallel between his story and those in our time who identify as asexual or transsexual?



Fun fact: Contrary to popular belief, it's not just Pentecostals who argue for a necessary, separate **second baptism** in the Spirit. "Historically, various groups have advocated a second experience of the Spirit, often citing this passage, including Anglo-Catholics and Catholics with their views of confirmation; Puritan and Reformed Sealers; Wesleyan, Holiness, and Keswickian groups; and Classical Pentecostals." [Keener's bigger Acts commentary, vol. 2, p. 1522.]

Further fun fact: "**Divinely aided transport** of some sort appears occasionally in ancient sources, including Jewish stories" [Keener, smaller *Acts*, 274] For instance, in the deuterocanonical *Bel and the Dragon*, vv. 35-36, Habbakuk is transported to Babylon to deliver dinner to Daniel in the lions' den: "Habakkuk said, 'Sir, I have never seen Babylon, and I know nothing about the den.' Then the angel of the Lord took him by the crown of his head and carried him by his hair; with a gust of wind he set him down in Babylon, right over the den." [Cf. also Homer *Iliad* 20.325-27; 1 Enoch 14:25; 87:3; 2 Baruch 63.]

⁶ Daniel may have been a eunuch.

Background and Leader's Notes:

In chapter 6, what could have been terrible disunity instead leads to enfolding of the gospel by the Hellenistic Jews. As Keener notes, this would prove to be crucial because, "those at least somewhat at home in more than one cultural sphere form here a bridge to the church's future." It was Stephen's multicultural background which helped him develop, in chapter 7, a radically new reading of Scripture to show that God is truly universal, with no preference for temple or promised land. These seeds bear fruit in Acts 8, where the persecution-driven diaspora takes the gospel across three boundaries: (a) gentile (the Eunuch being arguably the first gentile convert); (b) the first Samaritans; (c) racial boundaries (depending on those present at Pentecost); and (d) the first person (mentioned) with altered sexuality. This is clearly Luke's focus.

The challenge (explored below) is to read this chapter without seeing it in simplistic terms. The suffering inflicted by the Jerusalem persecution was significant, as demonstrated by the impact on whole families. Philip goes north, but despite finding a welcome audience, also finds a charlatan. And despite Philip's success, finding unity with the non-Hellenistic Jerusalem church was crucial. Many tensions are implied or unsaid here.

Some ice-breaker questions:

1. Acts is unique in the NT because it is narrative (unlike the epistles) but Jesus is not the main character being described (unlike the gospels). We may assume that we are supposed to see the early Christians as always being wise and right, and all events as ideal. This misreading of Acts is responsible for the Sunday-school, comic-book view, in which the early church is infallible and everything works out. What in this chapter *doesn't* go ideally? What is lousy or even awful?
2. This view may make Acts discouraging to read; everything we find hard, like spreading the gospel or maturing in the faith, they seem to do effortlessly. Since God can't be to blame, this must be an additional fault of ours. Where are we tempted to do that with Acts 8?
3. If you are Luke, what in chapter 8 do you anticipate will surprise your reader? Why did Luke include this material?