

Witness to the End of the World: A Missional Reading of Acts 8:26–40

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Abstract

In Acts 1:8, Christ told his disciples that they will be his witness ‘to the ends of the earth’. The article argued that Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26–40 was the beginning of a witness among people who were considered to live at the end of the world. In this article, the biblical account was read from a missional exegetical perspective, and, it discussed the sharing of Christ in a personal encounter and the Christ-centred message based on a translation of the Word of God. This event opened the door for an African to join the worldwide church, the body of Christ. The article concludes with the identification of five general principles that are significant for the church today in light of this passage.

Introduction

In the first half of Acts chapter 8, Luke described how Philip introduced the gospel to the Samaritans.² In the second half of the chapter, he described an encounter that Philip had with an individual from Africa.

¹ The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

² See Jabini 2010.

Bevan & Schroeder (2004:13, 21–22) listed the events of Acts 8 as stage four in their Seven Stages of Mission in Acts. This stage is where the 'Jewish identity of the community is transformed into the church as the community recognizes the Spirit among the Samaritans, in the Ethiopian eunuch' (p. 13). The two events in this chapter seem to be two different stages in the advance of the missions of the church. If my understanding is correct, the encounter with the eunuch is the beginning of missions to the end of the world. On the day of Pentecost, Jews were present from Egypt and Libya in North Africa (Acts 2:10). However, it is not clear from this passage whether they accepted the good news preached to them on that day. Even if that was the case, they were from the Jewish communities in North Africa.

This paper will analyse the encounter in Acts 8:26–40, the preaching of the gospel to an African, from a missional perspective. In the following pages, I will attempt to understand the identity of the man (the Ethiopian eunuch), the method, and the message of the encounter. In light of this, the paper concludes with five general principles for the contemporary church.

1. The Man

Acts 8:27 provides a brief introduction to the man in the encounter. He is described as an 'Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasury' (Acts 8:27). A few things may be said about this man.

Firstly, he was an Ethiopian. Ethiopia, in ancient documents, referred to the countries south of Egypt, present day Sudan and probably further south. Homer referred to the Ethiopians as people 'who are at the

world's end' (Odyssey 1.23).³ Therefore, it is safe to assume that people living in the countries south of Egypt were referred to as Ethiopians. The region was known in Old Testament times as *Cush*.⁴ From the Roman period, it was referred to as Nubia. Some scholars believe that Ethiopia means 'land of the people of burnt faces' (Smith 1996:665; see also LSJ, 'properly burnt-face, i.e. an Ethiop, negro'). According to Herodotus (II.22.3), the men in Ethiopia are μέλανες (*black*). The dark-skinned people from Africa fascinated the Greeks and Romans. Martin (1989:110–116) discussed the Ethiopian's identity and its ethnographic significance in details. He was a 'black skin' African. This point is often overlooked by expositors. The part of Africa from which this Ethiopian came can be safely assumed, since the text referred to Candace. '1st century readers would connect him specifically with the kingdom of Meroe, the queens of which traditionally were called "Candace"' (Gaventa 1996:667). Homer's understanding of the Ethiopians as the people 'who are at the world's end' makes this encounter an important one. Here, Philip introduced the gospel to a person who lived on the end of the world, ἐσχάτου τῆς γῆς, *eschatou tēs gēs* (Acts 1:8). Interpreters differ in their understanding of the phrase. Views ranged from Rome (Haenchen 1971; Conzelmann 1987; Fitzmyer 1998), the land of Palestine (Schwartz 1986), the end of the earth in a general sense (Van Unnik 1966), and Spain (Ellis 1991). Ethiopia and the 'eunuch' was argued for by Thornton (1977–78).

³ References to the classical texts, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the user created BibleWorks modules. 'Who are at the world's end' is based on Samuel Butler's translation of Homer's (Odyssee 1.22, 23) Greek phrase 'τηλόθ' ἐόντας ... ἔσχατοι ἀνδρῶν' 'being at a distance, (*far off, far away*) ... last, (*final*) of people' (my own translation).

⁴ The Hebrew כּוּשׁ, Cush, is translated Αἰθίοψ, Ethiopia, in the LXX.

It is therefore clear that the gospel does not know of geographic, ethnic, or racial barriers. Luke mentions another 'black' leader in the early church in Acts 13.

Perhaps it is worth mentioning that Scott (2009:767), however, argues that 'even after the eunuch's conversion, the church remains confined to the historic land and people of Israel'. The summary in Acts 9:31 according to him, does not speak about a church at the end of the world. Two issues should be taken into consideration here. In the first place, Acts 1:8 does not speak about establishing a church (ἐκκλησία) or churches (ἐκκλησίαι), even though that is important. The promise is to be a witness (μάρτυς) of Christ. As such the eunuch could have been a witness 'at the end of the world'. Furthermore, Acts 9:31 speaks about the church in 'Galilee'. Acts is silent about the planting of a church in Galilee (see Barrett 2004:473).

Secondly, he is further described as 'a eunuch'. Some scholars would argue that 'eunuch' should not be taken literally in Acts 8. Luke called him εὐνοῦχος δυνάστης (*eunouchos dunastēs*) 'a eunuch, a court official'.⁵ These scholars interpreted this as follows: 'a eunuch that is a high official in government' (see Jer 34:19).⁶ If that was Luke's intention, he did not have to include the word εὐνοῦχος, '*eunouchos*' (Polhill 1992:224; Witherington 1998:296; TDNT 2:768).⁷

⁵ The LXX of Deut 23 used the word 'θλαδίας' for ט"ף. See however, Isaiah 56:3.

⁶ Dutch translations seem to translate 'eunuch' as 'chamberlain' (NBG); 'an influential chamberlain' (LEI). This translation is defended by Van Eck (2003:207–208). Bruce (1998:175) is undecided when he stated that the 'term ... may have the more general sense of "chamberlain" or the stricter sense of "eunuch"'.
⁷ Some translations in the 'Today Versions' do not include the word 'eunuch' (see *Dios Habla Hoy*, CEV). See however TEV and GCL.

Thirdly, he came to Jerusalem to worship. This raised some questions about the religious identity of the man. Luke only tells us that 'he had come to Jerusalem to worship' (v. 27). As was the case with the Samaritans, religious background was not the focus of Luke. Scholars are not in agreement about his religious status. Was he a proselyte, a Gentile who became a follower of Judaism and was circumcised? This cannot be the case, since he was a eunuch. According to Deuteronomy 23:1, a eunuch may not enter the assembly (לְזָרָה, *qāhal*; LXX, ἐκκλησία) of the LORD.

Another option is that he was a God-fearer—a person who became a follower of Judaism, but was not circumcised. Scholars opposed this idea because the God-fearers were introduced to Christianity in Acts 10, with the conversion of Cornelius. Luke did not say that the Ethiopian was a God-fearer, as he did with others (Acts 10:1–3, 22; 13:16, 26, 43, 50; 16:4; 17:4, 17).

It seems that the eunuch was an adherent of Judaism. According to Bock (2007:342), he was a non-Jew who worshiped the Jewish God, a Diaspora God-fearer. Milkias (2011) gave an interesting overview of the religious situation in Ethiopia before Christ, from an Ethiopian perspective. In his view, 'Ethiopia' included 'ancient Nubia and part of the Axumite Empire' (which included present-day Ethiopia). According to him, Ethiopian sources indicated that the Queen of Sheba begot a son from Solomon (1 Kgs 10). He was called Menelik I. Menelik established the Solomonic dynasty in Ethiopia that lasted until the reign of Haile Selassie (pp. 171–172). He concluded that there were people in Ethiopia, who were monotheistic and associated with Judaism through the line of Menelik I, before Christ was born.⁸ There is no

⁸ Milkias (2011:181) also referred to an Ethiopian tradition that called the wise man who visited the new born Christ, the Ethiopian king Balthasar.

doubt that Judaic influence and an Old Testament reflection had reached Ethiopia long before the introduction of Christianity in AD 340 and before the Bible was translated into Ethiopic (p. 170).

One writer even argues that 'it is highly probable that the whole of Abyssinia was of Jewish persuasion previous to its conversion (to Christianity)' (cited in Seligson 1965:91).

Whatever the connection with Judaism and the God of Israel may have been, this passage clearly showed that being an adherent of Judaism does not make one a believer in Christ. Furthermore, no matter what the man's physical status was, the door to Christ was open for him. In Judaism, he would be limited to the Court of the Gentiles at the temple or the synagogue (Bock 2007:342). In the new era that inaugurated with the coming of the Christ, things have changed. The Old Testament foresaw those changes. Solomon (1 Kgs 8:41–43) prayed for people like this foreigner.

Foreigners, who do not belong to your people Israel, will come from a distant land because of your reputation. When they hear about your great reputation and your ability to accomplish mighty deeds, they will come and direct their prayers toward this temple. Then listen from your heavenly dwelling place and answer all the prayers of the foreigners. Then all the nations of the earth will acknowledge your reputation, obey you like your people Israel do, and recognize that this temple I built belongs to you.

Isaiah also promised eunuchs and foreigners full blessings in the future (Isa 56:3–8). 'Isaiah 56:3–7 anticipates a time of "full class membership" for eunuchs—a move from communal isolation and marginality to communal inclusion and wholeness' (Martin 1989:109). In the church of Christ, there is room not only for the half-breed

Samaritans, but also for the eunuch who, in the past, was excluded from access to God (Martin 1989:109). Now, in Christ, this foreign eunuch had full access to God.

Finally, the man was 'a court official of Candace' and he 'was in charge of all her treasury'.⁹ He was a minister or secretary of finance. This means he was well-to-do and a man of authority. God will use a simple follower of Christ, to preach the gospel to him.

2. The Method

In the case of Samaria, Philip preached to a crowd (ὄχλος, v. 6). In this encounter, there was no crowd, but one man. In Samaria, he preached in a city (πόλις, v. 5). Now, Philip was told to go to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza, a desert (ἔρημος) road (Acts 8:26).¹⁰ Here, he met one man.

[The angel of the Lord] directs him; for there were two roads, and an evangelist would not have chosen the one that was a desert. But the object of God's grace was travelling by this one; and an angel is employed as ever in God's providence, here objectively that we might not forget the truth or take account only of thoughts and feelings (Kelly 1890).

⁹ The Greek word used for 'treasury' is γάζα (*gaza*). The same word is used for the place in verse 26 Γάζα (*Gaza*). Barrett made the following remark: 'It is not impossible that Luke intends a pun between Γάζα, the place, and γάζα, *treasure*'.

¹⁰ The Greek word μεσημβρία (*mesēmbria*) can refer to time 'midday, noon' or place 'south'. The major English translations (TEV; NAS; NET; NIV; ESV), the German (GLC) and Spanish (DH) good news translations all translate it 'south'. The Dutch translations, all translated 'midday' (NBG; NBV; GNB; see however the HSV and WV). Barrett (2004:423) preferred 'midday'. He argued: 'It was by ordering such unusual action [into the desert in the hottest part of the day (Polhill 2001:223)] that the angel (as God's agent) ensured that Philip should fall in with the Ethiopian'.

The method used in this encounter differs from the Samaritan encounter. Firstly, there was a divine arrangement of events. In verse 26, 'an angel of the Lord' spoke to Philip and in verse 29, 'the Spirit' spoke to him (see also v. 39). Furthermore, the eunuch was reading a specific passage that would allow Philip to preach Christ to him. God was clearly involved in this encounter. The involvement of angels in the life of the early believers is remarkable. An angel led John and Peter out of prison (Acts 5:19), came to Cornelius and spoke with him (10:3, 7, 22; 11:13), led Peter out of prison (12:7-15), struck Herod (12:23), and came to Paul and encouraged him (27:23, 24). Closely related to the angelic involvement is the leading of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit spoke to Peter about Cornelius and commanded him to go to him (Acts 10:19-20); demanded that Saul and Barnabas be set apart for missions (13:2); sent Paul and Barnabas to the mission field (13:4); prevented Paul to preach in the province of Asia and traveling to Bithynia (16:6, 7). God also directed the events in missions through dreams and visions. Mission belongs to God (*missio Dei*). He is involved in missions through supernatural means. The church's involvement in missions will be poor if the involvement of God is left out or not taken into consideration. God is at work. He was at work in the life of the eunuch and he was also at work in the life of Cornelius (see Acts 10). In fact, he was there before any messenger arrived, prepared the way, and sent his messengers to labour with him in missions. In Acts 9, there is another remarkable incident. The Lord spoke to a 'disciple in Damascus named Ananias ... in a vision' (Acts 9:10). In other words, the appearance of God in dreams, visions, or by the Holy Spirit causing one to fall into a trance, and was not limited to the leaders of the church.

There are a number of instances in the history of the church in which God, in his sovereignty, touched the lives of people without human intervention. After his intervention, God directed these people to human

messengers. The story of a 19th century Maroon in Suriname is an example of this.¹¹ Johannes King, 'a witchdoctor,' received a vision from God. In the vision, it became clear to him that if he continued in his way of living, he would go to hell. God gave him a vision of what life in hell would be. King was then directed to the Moravian missionaries in the vision, who were going to give him further explanation of what he should do. Consequently, King became a strong messenger and prophetic figure in the interior of Suriname, leading his entire tribe to Christianity.

I have, likewise, personally witnessed how God drew an old lady to himself. She could not read nor write and was often drunk. I have tried to witness to her, but because she was often drunk, I was not successful. One early Sunday morning, she came to me and told me she must go to church with me on that day. As she later explained, she had a dream in which a serpent was trying to devour her. She was told in the dream to join the boat in which I was travelling. If she obeyed, she would be saved. Later that day, she confessed Christ as her Lord and saviour. She was baptized and brought great joy to our church.

Secondly, there was a personal approach to evangelism. In verse 29, the Spirit told Philip to join the chariot. Philip heard the man reading from the scripture. He used that scripture reading as the point of departure for a conversation. Philip asked a question and the man asked a counter-question. 'To this eunuch fell the privilege of asking—and it is the first recorded instance of the question being asked—of whom the prophet in the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah was speaking. And to Philip was granted the privilege of giving a definite answer to the eunuch's question' (Young 1949:132).

¹¹ See Freytag (1927) and the dissertation of Zamuel (1994) for the details on the life and ministry of Johannes King.

It is remarkable how the book of Acts pays attention to the crowd, household, and the individual. The gospel was meant to be shared with all. In the era of mega-crusades, personal evangelism seems to be out of focus. Even though circumstances will not always be like that of the eunuch, history has proven that God used, and is still using, the sharing of Christ on a one to one basis. In some contexts, that may be the only way for evangelism. Bosch (1991:10–11) gave the following detailed definition of evangelism: 'Evangelism is the proclamation of salvation in Christ to those who do not believe in him, calling them to repentance and conversion, announcing forgiveness of sin, and inviting them to become members of Christ's earthly community and to begin a life of service to others in the power of the Holy Spirit.'¹²

This event was a cross-cultural event. Philip, a simple Hellenistic Jew, was sent to preach the gospel to a well-to-do African. 'Simple Christians can share Christ with people who are different from them by simply loving them and by being humble and sensitive to their needs' (Fernando 1998:288).

Thirdly, he used a translated scripture. The text that the eunuch was reading, Isaiah 53:7–8, seems to have been the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament (vv. 32–33). The eunuch was able to read the word of God in a language that he could understand. This makes Bible translation an important tool in missions. The LXX was not without problems.¹³ In this citation, it seems to differ from the original Masoretic text in a number of ways. And yet, Philip did not start by making corrections to the translation or pointing to its

¹² The actual practice of an evangelist will not always include all these elements. The events in Acts 8 give evidence for this.

¹³ See Fitzmyer (1998:413) who stated that the LXX is not 'an accurate rendering of the MT'.

imperfection.¹⁴ Even though the words may differ, the intention of the passage in both texts is the same. Despite its shortcomings in some places, the Greek translation of the Old Testament was the Bible used by the Holy Spirit in missions to the Greek-speaking people.

Two things can be learnt from this. In the first place, scriptures should be translated in the language that people best understand. And secondly, evangelists should focus on the text that people are using. *That* text should be the point of departure.

Fourthly, there was a baptism. The preaching of Philip resulted in the eunuch asking the question of baptism. It is clear that Philip preached a full gospel to the man, in which he also explained the need for baptism. As they were travelling along the road, they arrived to some water, and the eunuch said, 'Look, there is water! What is to stop me from being baptized?' (Acts 8:36)

It is not clear how Philip responded. Some manuscripts record that Philip asked a question, followed by an answer from the eunuch. He said to him, 'If you believe with your whole heart, you may.' He replied, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God' (v. 37).

Whether the conversation went along those lines cannot be established with certainty, due mainly to the lack of textual evidences.¹⁵ This is

¹⁴ The Bible as a book is translatable. Sanneh (1989) sees Christianity in its very nature as a translatable religion. He argued for translation beyond textual work (p. 3). However, as Walls (1996:26) indicated, it is impossible to transmit meaning exactly from one linguistic medium to another. Translators have to make choices on almost every word in a translation.

¹⁵ This verse is not found in some manuscripts and is omitted in modern translations. Metzger (2002:315) made the following observation: 'Although the earliest known New Testament manuscript that contains the words dates from the sixth century (ms. E), the tradition of the Ethiopian's confession of faith in Christ was current as early as the latter part of the second century, for Irenaeus quotes part of it (*Against Heresies*,

followed by his baptism. Baptism seems to have been an integral part of the message of Jesus. In the New Testament, baptism seems to follow confession of faith, without a time difference. This is seen in Peter's message on the day of Pentecost: 'Repent, and each one of you be baptized ... Those who accepted his message were baptised' (Acts 2:38, 41). Philip did the same in Samaria: 'When they believed ... they were baptised' (Acts 8:12 NIV). This is true for Cornelius (Acts 10) and the gaoler in Philippi (Acts 16). Baptism is an important aspect in the process of disciple-making (Matt 28:19). In all of the above examples, people were baptized after they confessed faith in Christ.

The words ἀνέβησαν (*went up*, 8:39) and κατέβησαν (*went down*, Acts 8:38), do not refer to the method of baptism ('sprinkling' versus 'immersion'). None of these two methods can be derived from this passage. Some would argue based on the phrase, 'When they came up out of the water' (Acts 8:39) implies that Philip immersed the eunuch. This is not necessarily the case, since the text does not refer to them being 'under the water'. They were 'in' the water and came 'out' of it. The mode of baptism is not explained in this verse.

When and how should one baptize once people respond to the good news? Should one follow the method of household baptism, as was done in the case of Cornelius (Acts 10), Lydia (Acts 16), the jailer (Acts 16), Crispus (Acts 18), and Stephanus (1 Cor 1:16)? Or, should one conduct believers' baptism in the sense of immersion? These questions

III.xii:8)'. The NET has the following comments: 'The variant is significant in showing how some in the early church viewed a confession of faith'. See also Fitzmyer (1998:415), who stated that the reading is ancient.

should be settled in ecclesiology.¹⁶ The evangelist, however, cannot deny people, who are reached with the gospel, baptism. Baptism is an important witness of the believer's connection to Jesus Christ.¹⁷

Finally, the messenger was taken away (v. 39). After he preached the message and baptized the convert, his assignment ended. Others will have to take over the responsibility from this evangelist. The Spirit had another assignment for him. Philip, however, found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through the area, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea (Acts 8:40).

The task of the evangelist from this passage seems to be: preaching Christ to the people, baptising them, and moving on to other assignments. Others, like Paul, spent some time with the new converts and instructed them in the teachings of the Lord. It is clear that there is no general method for the evangelist. Some will be called to preach from one place to another, as Billy Graham did in this generation. Others will be called to labour in one place for many years.

Some manuscripts add the following words in verse 39: 'the Holy Spirit fell on the eunuch, then the angel of the Lord snatched Philip away'.¹⁸ This addition included a new Pentecost for the eunuch. Even though the text is not supported by the major manuscripts and is rejected by most

¹⁶ See Ouweneel (2011), who discussed the issue of baptism in his volume on the 'Covenant and kingdom of God'. He argues that there is a clear connection between baptism and the kingdom of God.

¹⁷ It is remarkable that Philip did not call upon the church to come and baptize the Samaritans or the eunuch. Clearly, baptism was not reserved for a special group within the church. Paul was also not baptized by one of the pillars of the church, but by another disciple (Acts 9:10, 18).

¹⁸ The phrase reads: 'πνεῦμα ἅγιον ἐπέπεσεν ἐπὶ τὸν εὐνοῦχον· ἄγγελος δὲ κυρίου ἤρπασεν τὸν Φίλιππον' (see the discussion in Metzger 2002:316; Van Eck 2003:212; Barrett 2004:435; Bock 2007:348).

translations, it is clear that the Holy Spirit played a critical role in the conversion of this man. This made it possible for him to go 'on his way rejoicing' (Acts 8:39).

3. The Message

What was the message of Philip? The text says that Philip, 'beginning with this scripture proclaimed the good news about Jesus to him' (Acts 8:35). The Greek reads: εὐηγγελίστατο αὐτῷ τὸν Ἰησοῦν (*euēngeliasto autō ton Iēsou*), literally 'he proclaimed good news to him (about) Jesus'. L&N (33.215) translated this phrase as 'he told him the good news about Jesus'. BDAG (s.v. εὐαγγελίζω) listed our passage under: 'proclaim the divine message of salvation, proclaim the gospel' and added 'with mention of the thing proclaimed, as well as of the person who receives the message'. The message that was preached was 'Jesus'. Even though the audiences in Samaria and on this desert road were different, Philip's message was the same (vv. 12, 35). Cultural differences and circumstances may require a different approach to the preaching of the message. The subject of the message should always be Christ.

On May the 26th 1774, Benjamin Fawcett preached a sermon based on 2 Corinthians 4:5: 'For we do not proclaim ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake'. Fawcett's sermon was based on the following four points:

First, to show that faithful ministers of the gospel make it their grand concern to preach Christ Jesus the Lord. Secondly, that they dread the thought of preaching themselves, instead of Christ. Thirdly, that while they preached Christ, and not themselves, they are themselves the servant of immortal souls. And, fourthly that

their principal motive for engaging in such service of immortal souls, is for Jesus’ sake (Fawcett 1774:2).

Philip preached Christ based on Isaiah 53:7–8. However, the text seems to indicate that he utilised other passages too. The word translated ‘beginning’ ἀρξάμενος (*arxamenos*), seems to indicate that the Isaiah passage was only the point of departure.¹⁹ Philip may have mimicked Peter’s actions on the day of Pentecost, where Peter started with Joel, but used other passages from scripture to develop his message. Or more specifically, Philip followed the example of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. Then, beginning (ἀρξάμενος) with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things written about himself in all the scriptures (Luke 24:27).

Philip based his preaching to this man on an exposition of passages from scripture. Did he use the same method in Samaria? It is not clear. The content of the message was the same, but the method may have been different. The result on both occasions was the same. In Samaria, there was great joy (χαρὰ μεγάλη, v. 8), and the Ethiopian went on his way ‘rejoicing’ (χαίρων, v. 39). According to Milkias (2011:180) ‘Ethiopian historical records assert that he [the eunuch] returned home and evangelized Christianity in Ethiopia’. A comment made by Irenaeus is worth citing.

This man was also sent into the regions of Ethiopia, to preach what he had himself believed, that there was one God preached by the prophets, but that the Son of this [God] had already made [His] appearance in human nature (*secundum hominem*), and had been led as a sheep to the slaughter; and all the other statements which the prophets made regarding Him (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 3.12.8. See also 4.23.2).

¹⁹ See BDAG s.v. ἀρχω 2.c, ‘with indication of the starting point’.

Cadbury and Lake (1965:98) referred to Epiphanius, who said that he preached in 'Arabia Felix and on the coast of the Red Sea' and 'that he was martyred'. Scholars are not in agreement about the role that the eunuch played in taking Christianity back to Ethiopia. Luke does not make any reference to it in his record. A similar approach was also taken by him with regards to Simon in the first section of Acts 8. However, it may be safely assumed that the eunuch shared his new-found faith in Jesus Christ in his country. As such, he was a witness of Christ to the end of the earth.

4. The Meaning

What are the lessons from this encounter for missions today? Scholars have raised questions about the appropriate approach in applying the message of the book of Acts. 'Are the practises of the early church given for later generations to follow and even imitate?' (Liefeld 1995:117) Or, are the events written in the book descriptive and 'not necessary to be followed by the church at all times and in all places?' (p. 117) Comparing the two events makes it clear that God does not always work in the same way. In other words, Philip could not use the Acts 2 model in Samaria or on the desert road. There was no need for an apostle to come to pray with the eunuch to receive the Holy Spirit. Liefeld (p. 124) raised the following caution: 'The interpreter of Acts must, however, be especially cautious lest methods that were appropriate in specific circumstances in the first century be absolutized for all time'. Yet, it is possible to draw some principles from the encounter that may be meaningful to the church today.

Interestingly, The Saint Thomas, born Eduard W Blyden, of Igbo (Nigerian) slave parents, drew different principles from this encounter. According to him, the encounter is symbolic of instruments and

methods of Africa's evangelism. 'The method, the simple holding up of Jesus Christ; the instrument, the African himself' (1888:184). Another symbol that he saw in the encounter was the future and experience of the eunuch's race. 'It was upholding Christ as the "man of sorrows and acquainted with grief," as if in anticipation of the great and unsurpassed trials of the Africa' (p. 185).

4.1. The sovereignty of God in missions

In the current era of missions' strategies and methodologies, it is always important to recognize that 'missions' is the business of God, and that he is sovereign.²⁰ He can and should be allowed to by-pass our methods and strategies. In the case of Philip, he led him away from a ministry in which he was reaching a multitude, to 'go after' one individual. By doing this, God used Philip to preach Christ, so that there will be witnesses of Christ in Samaria and the ends of the earth.

4.2. The importance of an obedient servant

In our age of convenience and 'few workers', the Lord of the harvest is looking for obedient servants. Obedient servants are willing to go wherever and whenever the Lord wants them to go. Missions is not only the mission of God (*missio Dei*), but also that of the obedient church and the responsive individual. Philip's call did not come through a church or the apostles. God sent him directly.²¹

²⁰ E.g. Dayton & Fraser 1990 and various chapters in Terry, Smith & Anderson 1998. The call for reaching 'people' and 'people groups' should allow for reaching individuals.

²¹ See however Saul and Barnabas in Acts 13 and the involvement of the apostles in the Samaria encounter (Acts 8).

4.3. The importance of personal evangelism

The Jerusalem missions conference in 1928 argued for a 'comprehensive approach' to missions, with preaching as its central aspect. Since then, missions have been defined very broadly. This led Stephen Neill to make the following remark in 1959, that become well known in missions circles: 'If everything is mission, nothing is mission'. In the midst of a comprehensive approach to missions, there should be room for a narrow, concentrated approach to one aspect of missions, such as personal evangelism. Paragraph six of the Lausanne Covenant contains the following statement: 'In the Church's mission of sacrificial service, evangelism is primary'. Philip's encounter with the eunuch illustrates that church planting is not always the goal of evangelism. Personal evangelism may focus on winning a soul for Christ.

4.4. The importance of the word of God

The word of God has always played a crucial part in missions and evangelism. Philip used the word as the point of departure for his teaching. He preached from a translated scripture. The scripture was probably not in the mother tongue of the eunuch. It is critical to give people the word of God in a language that they best understand. However, that language is not always the mother tongue. Globalization and, especially urbanization, make it possible for people of different languages to live together in one area, speaking a common *lingua franca*. However, there are still people groups who need a Bible in language that they best understand.

4.5. The importance of a Christ-centred message

Philip and the evangelists of the early church preached Christ-centred messages. The multi-religious and multi-cultural society of their days did not prevent them from sharing Christ with their neighbours. Paragraph 3 of the Lausanne Covenant stated the following:

We also reject as derogatory to Christ and the gospel every kind of syncretism and dialogue which implies that Christ speaks equally through all religions and ideologies. Jesus Christ, being himself the only God-man, who gave himself as the only ransom for sinners, is the only mediator between God and people. There is no other name by which we must be saved.

As evangelists today follow in the footsteps of Philip, they will cause people from many nations to stretch out their hands to God in worship (cf. Ps 68:31). God's people should, in obedience to Christ (Acts 1:8), be witnesses of Christ to the whole world.

After these things I looked, and here was an enormous crowd that no one could count, made up of persons from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb dressed in long white robes, and with palm branches in their hands. They were shouting out in a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God, to the one seated on the throne, and to the Lamb! (Rev 7:9–10)

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