

Text: Acts 8  
St Stephen's

Oct 28, 2007  
Sunday

## Beyond Jerusalem With Philip

We are walking through the Book of Acts a week at a time... The next three chapters feature three conversion stories... case studies in conversions.

- Ch 8 The conversion of a black African eunuch
- Ch 9 The conversion of a member of the Jewish leadership, who had been in charge of persecuting the church
- Ch 10 The conversion of a Gentile roman soldier

**Conversion is dirty word** in today's pluralistic and relativistic world. We think it smacks of pride, arrogance, disrespect, perhaps worse. We have an '**Aversion to Conversion...**'

**Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu**, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, was in Pitts last week for an **interfaith service** at Calvary Church in East Liberty where he received honorary doctorates from CMU and Univ of Pitt. Representatives of protestant and catholic and Jewish communities were there, as well as agnostics and atheists who respect him. He is a great man of heroic stature, known best for his long fight against the evil of apartheid in South Africa; he is a living legend.

But he is **not too happy** with those of us who believe in Christian conversion, and he **said something significant** about it this week. In her PPG article on his visit, Ann Rodgers wrote that 'he poked fun at the belief that only those who accept Jesus as their savior can enter heaven. *"Can you imagine that there are those who think God is a Christian?"* he said to laughter from a mostly appreciative audience. *"Can you tell us what God was before he was a Christian?"*

Well, the Archbishop speaks for many modern people. A lot of people put it this way; this is their bumper sticker: "**Conversation, not Conversion**" Maybe you also find yourself anxious about conversion. So let's give it some thought for a few weeks.

In a publicized letter to the Pope John Paul II, one Hindu scholar (Swami Dayananda Saraswati) argued that *"religious conversion destroys centuries-old communities and incites communal violence. It is violence and it breeds violence."*

There is no doubt that some conversions have been **a matter of force**. Christianity has had its **tragic share** of this. **Islam** has gained fame for forced conversions. Is this true, though, of Christian conversion in general? It would be hard to say so from the pages of the Bible.

When you look at the conversion stories in the Bible, you see a different power at work. Not human force of threatened violence, but instead the **power of the Holy Spirit** guiding people, reaching people, turning people around and bringing them to faith in Jesus. When we ask, **'Who produces Christian conversion?'** our first answer must be this...

## **1) Christian Conversion is the Work of the Risen Lord Jesus Through His Spirit**

Remember what we said was Luke's theme as he wrote Acts? The Gospel of Luke is about **what Jesus did and taught** during his years on earth. Acts is about **what Jesus continues to do and teach** from heaven. **Both are about Jesus - what Jesus did and does**, to this very day.

The pattern is visible all over this chapter...

*When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said.*

Acts 8:6 (NIV)

*When Peter and John arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit...*

Acts 8:15 (NIV)

It was the **power of Jesus** all over again, healing people and delivering people from demons, and filling believers with the Holy Spirit.

*Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south..." The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."*

Acts 8:26, 29 (NIV)

It was angels sent by Jesus and the Spirit of Jesus directing and guiding

and leading. There is no missing what is happening in these chapters. Christian conversion is not so much a **human** activity as it is a **supernatural**, divine activity. It is something that happens by God's initiative, by God's leading, by God's power, in God's timing. It is the **work of God's Son through God's Spirit.**

Let's get the picture here... Philip is heading south, and...

*on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet.*

Acts 8:27-28 (NIV)

Who is this Ethiopian?

- **He is a black African** in Jerusalem. Ethiopia was in the upper region of the Nile, the closest of the African countries.
- **A man of great power and wealth.** "an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians" He is the CFO, the Secretary of the Treasury, a member of the Queen's Cabinet. By any human measure, he is a success.
- **He paid quite a price to get there.** If you were a male commoner, aspiring to government service, you would never be trusted in the circles of power unless you were castrated. It was the price of upward mobility in the government. Career success has its price. Always.
- **He is educated.** He is reading a scroll of Isaiah. Few could read in those days, and fewer would own a scroll of the Book of Isaiah. But he could and he did and he was reading.
- **He is spiritually hungry.** Look what he is doing; he is coming from Ethiopia to Jerusalem to worship. With all the temples and gods and religions in Ethiopia, none were enough to fill the longing in his heart. He has made it to the top and it is not enough. He is in serious spiritual search mode. So he takes a couple months off and heads for Jerusalem.

I can think of a million reasons why Philip might not want to engage that eunuch in conversation that day. They had racial differences, religious

differences, vocational differences, socio-economic differences... Many of us today would have backed off the opportunity, under the influence of **multiculturalism**. "That Ethiopian has his truth and I have my truth... He has his culture and I have my culture... 'conversation' perhaps, but certainly not conversion.

But **the Holy Spirit would not let Philip back off**. Conversion to Christ is God's agenda above ours. His work, his passion, his gospel.

There is **a second answer** to our 'conversion' question, because almost without exception the Holy Spirit **moves through people** in the process of conversion. So the second answer to our conversion question is...

## **2) Christian Conversion is the Work of the Risen Lord Jesus Through His People**

*"Go south... to the desert road..." "Go to that chariot and stay near it."*  
Acts 8:26,29 (NIV)

Look at how the Spirit uses Philip in this conversion... He is **instantly responsive** to the Spirit's guidance.

*"Go south..."* into the desert- away from spectacular ministry among the Samaritans. He goes...

*'Get next to that Chariot...'*

Philip runs alongside the chariot, close enough to hear the Ethiopian reading Isaiah aloud. I can just **picture this**...

**Philip jogging** along... 'Hey! What's up...! Reading anything good? Isaiah! I love Isaiah! That's a great passage. Do you understand it?'

What I really love is the **Ethiopian's response** to Philip's question...

*"How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.*

Acts 8:31 (NIV)

**Remember who this guy is.** He is the CFO of Ethiopia. He is a huge success. He is highly educated. He owned an Isaiah scroll. With all that this tells us about him, he says, "I need someone to tell me what this

means..." He is **hungry** and he is **teachable**. Most people who have had some measure of success in their lives find that it is **hard to say, "I need someone** to tell me what this means...". People who have had success are self reliant and have to keep up this mask of being in control. But not this guy. He is hungry and he is teachable.

And in that season of his life, in that moment of that day, God **puts Philip alongside him**, Philip who understands the bible and who is ready to be a **spiritual friend** to this guy. God almost always works like that, through spiritual friendships, through people who are ready to help folks along to faith in Christ.

All Philip needed to be was **available and prepared**. He was both. That is our second answer to our question of how conversion happens. It happens **through spiritual friendships**.

There is a third answer.

### **3) Christian Conversion is the Work of the Risen Lord Jesus Through His Word**

Look at what this man is reading.

*The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture:*

*"He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,  
and as a lamb before the shearer is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.*

*In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.*

*Who can speak of his descendants?*

*For his life was taken from the earth."*

Acts 8:32-33 (NIV)

I have been thinking about this man, and I have some thoughts about **what might have happened to him on the way to Jerusalem** to worship. Remember who he is. A success – but empty. A seeker – but a eunuch. In Jerusalem, he would have found that he **eunuchs** were a special class of people. They were subject to **a prohibition**. Deu 23.1 says...

*No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the*

*assembly of the Lord.*

Deuteronomy 23:1 (NIV)

He would have been told, people like you are **not allowed** in the Temple to worship. There was a prohibition. But there was also in scripture a promise for the eunuchs. It is in Isaiah 56.3-5

*let not any eunuch complain,  
"I am only a dry tree."*

*For this is what the Lord says:*

*"To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,  
who choose what pleases me  
and hold fast to my covenant—  
to them I will give **within my temple** and its walls  
a memorial and a name  
better than sons and daughters;  
I will give them an everlasting name  
that will not be cut off.*

Isaiah 56:3-5 (NIV)

So there was a **prohibition**... crushing, heartbreaking. But there was also a **promise**. And I think the weight and the hope of both was on his heart as he drove home that day. And he was reading around that 56<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah when he **came upon the words in our text** about a **servant** who would **bear the sins of many**, and who for their sake suffered and was cut off and lost his descendants, but who through his suffering triumphed, and would have many sons and daughters.

*Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.*

*As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?"*

Acts 8:35-36 (NIV)

He told him about the **power of Jesus' death** and the astounding news of his **resurrection**, and about how every sin could be washed, how every nation could be welcomed, how every fear could be stilled, and every heart flooded with the Spirit of Jesus.

It **didn't matter how empty** he was – he would be filled! Or **how broken was his sexuality** – he would be a son among many sons and daughters. Or **what his culture or nation or race** – he was welcome. And he was welcome!!! He must have talked about how God was building a family that would go on forever, sons and daughters together... It was 'good news', just good news after good news after good news...'

And – I love this – he says 'Here is water, why shouldn't I be baptized?' And Philip says, you should! There is **nothing preventing you**, not any more. The **prohibition is over**. The **promise is here**. **The temple doors are open!** By simple faith in Jesus, you can come right on in!

Alongside that chariot that day there was forgiveness and fulfillment and joy, and two very different men went down into the waters of baptism, the waters of conversion to Jesus, and came up brothers.

What is there not to like, not to love about the power of conversion to Christ? By simple faith in Jesus, you can have a brand new life!