

THE BOOK OF ACTS – FAITH SHARING 101

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Acts 8: 26-38

We're focusing on the Book of Acts because it provides us with a basic model for disciple-making. And disciple-making is what we do. It's the main task Christ has given us. Ford builds cars. Wing Stop serves chicken and sides. Rosemont Middle School educates teenagers. The Dodgers develop awesome teams that never make it out of the playoffs. And the church makes disciples.

Today we're focusing on Philip and the Ethiopian. The question we're asking is: What makes Philip such an effective evangelist? Philip exhibits ten different attitudes or practices that can help us as we share our faith with others. We'll put them up on the screen, and you don't have to worry about copying them down because we'll post them later on the church's Facebook page.

As we move through each of the ten points, I hope you'll be thinking about your own life, and the opportunities God has given you. If you're discouraged about your own faith-sharing efforts, as most of us are, I hope you'll be inspired by Philip's simple example. I'm convinced we can be effective as disciple-makers if we'll take our cues from the Bible, and follow the steps laid out for us by the very first disciples. What worked for Philip can work for us.

First let's clarify who we're talking about. The Philip of the Gospels is one of Jesus' original twelve apostles. The Philip that we just read about is a different guy. He's a brand new convert in the very first church in Jerusalem. We meet him for the first time in the sixth chapter of Acts.

The twelve apostles who were leading that church were having the kinds of problems that always arise in dynamic, start-up organizations. They were being stretched too thin. They were teaching and preaching and providing for the people's spiritual needs. But they were also handling the distribution of food to poor widows in the congregation. They couldn't give the job the attention it deserved. Complaints arose. The Hellenistic Jews whined that the Hebraic Jews were getting more than their fair share in the distribution. People were ticked off.

The apostles addressed the problem by widening the circles of leadership. They asked the whole fellowship of believers to choose seven people to deal with the congregation's physical needs. "Pick people," they said, "who are wise and full of the Holy Spirit." The seven who were elected essentially became the first Deacon board. Philip and Stephen were among them. They served tables and made sure the poorest church members were treated with dignity.

Immediately after being assigned to deal with food distribution, Stephen began to testify about Jesus to the spiritual leaders of Israel. They responded by stoning him, and then by systematically persecuting the believers in Jerusalem. Many of them were forced to flee the city. People wondered if that would be the end of the church.

But of course God was just getting started. In the midst of this tumult, he sent our man, Philip, about twenty miles north to the city of Samaria to tell people about Jesus. Philip immediately began to tell the people there about Jesus, and to perform many signs and wonders in Jesus's name. He didn't wait for the Apostles that had received hands-on training by Jesus to start a Samaritan preaching tour. He didn't worry about the fact that he had only the Old Testament to guide him. He didn't disqualify himself

because he was just a lowly food-distribution coordinator who hadn't been ordained to preach, baptize and serve communion.

He was so excited about the good news of Jesus's resurrection – so anxious for others to know Jesus and receive the gift of new life in his name – that he just started talking. The words of life flowed out of him like water from a spring.

Here's how Luke describes the scene in Samaria:

When the crowds hear Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was great joy in that city.

- Acts 8: 6-8

The obstacles to faith that we confront in our culture are mild compared to those confronted by Stephen and Philip. We risk offending people, or being labeled as fringe fanatics. They risked their necks. Yet the Spirit blessed their work, and made them abundantly fruitful. He minimized their deficiencies and magnified their limited capacities.

Philip and Stephen set the pattern for the Church from the beginning. They remind us that everyone is called to preach – even those who just serve table or who do other simple tasks. Yes, some people in the church have a special gift for evangelism. But everyone is called to testify.

So here's the first reason why Philip is effective as an evangelist: He understands that his day job isn't his main job.

I recently heard a pastor of a large church tell a story that illustrates the point. The pastor was talking to a man in his church that he didn't know. He said to him, "What do you do?" And the man replied, "I'm a disciple of Christ cleverly disguised as a machine operator."

That man understood what it means to be Christ's ambassador. He saw that his day job wasn't his main job.

Who's the best person to reach a machine operator for Christ? Another machine operator.

Who's the best person to reach a sophomore at Crescenta Valley High School for Christ?

Another CV sophomore.

Who's the best person to reach the woman in your car pool, or the man who works in the cubicle next to you for Christ? Most likely, you are.

Philip's next big adventure is the one we just read about. You can turn now to Acts, chapter 8, beginning at verse 26, if you want to follow along.

Using an angel as his spokesperson, the Holy Spirit sends Philip down the lightly-traveled desert road from Jerusalem to Gaza. Why has God chosen Philip? As we've seen, it isn't because he's the most experienced or learned or eloquent candidate. I think it's because of his great love and empathy for

people who are disenfranchised. Philip had been selected to distribute food to widows who were being treated as outsiders by the ethnic Jews within the Church. Now he's being sent out to share the food of the Gospel with one who truly is a spiritual outsider.

Philip loves Jesus, and he loves the people that Jesus loves. That's the second reason why Philip is such an effective witness.

Too many of us see faith-sharing as a specialized ministry that requires a lot of training and experience. From God's perspective, we need only two things to be productive kingdom-builders. We need to love the Lord. And we need to love the people that he loves. Of course we're all lacking in both of those areas. But as we step out in faith, God fills us with his love, and causes us to love him and our neighbors more and more each day.

The Anglican missionary, Roland Allen, learned that crucial lesson from a lifetime of experience on the mission field in China. He once wrote:

Missionary zeal does not grow out of intellectual beliefs, nor out of theological arguments, but out of love.

The main point is that no one is exempted from the call to make disciples. All of us who aspire to love Christ and our neighbor are called to introduce people to Jesus.

The third reason Philip is effective is because he's tuned into God's Spirit.

The road that the Spirit wants Philip to go down is deserted. It seems to be leading in the opposite direction from the place where the fruit is growing. I think if I'd been Philip I would have said, "Why in the world would I want to leave Samaria? All the action's right here!" But Philip doesn't question God's logic. He obeys the angel even though he has no idea what God has prepared for him out in the desert. All Philip knows for sure is that God has called him to make disciples.

We, too, need to trust the Spirit as we plot our course in life. God often sends us down roads that seem to take away from the action – away from the place that feels right to us. But in those times of uncertainty, we can rely on his promises. He's not going to make a mistake, and send us to a place where we'll stagnate. He's going to open up new opportunities for us to be fruitful – in his time, and his way.

It's easier to take that message to heart if, like Philip, you've heard a clear word from an angel. I have friends who hear from God in similar ways as they seek his will in prayer. One receives images or pictures that help to point the way for her. Another hears words or phrases as he's praying that are audible only to him.

I often wish that God would give me a sign or a word that would resolve my doubts and point me in the right direction. There are times for most of us when we'd give anything for that kind of instruction. But God rarely communicates with us in that way. Instead, he requires a lot more from us. He drags us into the decision-making process. He forces us to contemplate our circumstances, meditate deeply on his Word, and then plot our course in the midst of uncertainty.

Few of us have ever been called into service by an angel. But all of us who love the Lord have been called out of the church and into the world. If we don't hear that call, it's not because the Spirit isn't speaking to us; it's because we've chosen not to listen to him.

Are you tuned into God's Spirit? Are you ready and willing to go wherever he sends you? Is there a desert road in your life that you've been avoiding?

The fourth reason Philip is effective is because he's willing to leave his comfort zone for the sake of a person in need.

He knows the Lord is the kind of shepherd who leaves his 99 sheep safe and secure in their sheepfold to go in search of the one that's lost.

Many of us feel safe within the familiar confines of the church community. It's hard for us to believe that the work God has for us outside that community is more important than the work we do inside it. As a result, many of us allow church work to get in the way of kingdom work.

Are you using church work to distract you from the more important work of disciple-making?

Philip travels many miles before he overtakes another southbound traveler. Luke identifies him as an Ethiopian eunuch from the court of the queen. The unnamed official is traveling by chariot with an entourage of servants. He has responsibility over the queen's entire treasury. He's obviously a member of the one percent, and a pretty big deal.

Philip can see and hear that that man is reading from the Book of Isaiah as he rumbles down the road. The passage is from chapter 53, where the prophet speaks of the Suffering Servant as a sheep that was led to slaughter.

From all outward appearances, there's a huge cultural and socio-economic gap between Philip and the Ethiopian. Yet Philip doesn't assume, as most of us would, that it's someone else's job to talk to the man about Jesus. He doesn't try to summon James or John on his cell phone, as I would have done. Instead, see an opportunity and leaps on it. That's the fifth reason why he's an effective witness.

"Do you understand what you're reading?" Philip asks.

"How can I," the Ethiopian replies, "unless someone explains it to me?"

The man invites Philip to board the chariot so they can talk. Pretty soon Philip is explaining that the sheep that Isaiah is talking about is actually Jesus of Nazareth. We have to imagine the rest of the conversation, but you can be sure that, from that point on, the Ethiopian is hanging on Philip's every word.

Is it possible that there's someone in your circle of influence, right now, that isn't going to hear the Good News about Jesus unless you tell it to her? Philip didn't assume that someone else – someone better qualified – would come to the rescue. And neither should we.

The sixth reason Philip is effective is because the Spirit leads him to a seeker. Jesus told his disciples that the harvest is ripe in the fields. Obviously he didn't mean that every person we meet is ready to repent.

He meant, rather, that when we respond to his call to go out to the fields, the Spirit leads us to those people who are ready to hear and receive the truth.

Most of the time, the place where God sends us doesn't look anything like a field of ripe grain. Instead it looks more like the lonely desert road where Philip met the Ethiopian. But God promises to make us fruitful. When we obey his call, and trust in his power, he leads us to people who are ripe and ready.

How does Philip manage to engage the Ethiopian and gain his trust? He's well-mannered, but he's also provocative. That's the seventh reason why Philip is effective. He's not envious of the Ethiopian's wealth, or judgmental of his position. But he's also not afraid to speak to him as an equal. His question – "Do you understand what you're reading?" – is an invitation to talk about God, but it's somewhat risky. What if the Ethiopian thinks Philip is insulting his intelligence, or that he's scornful of his beliefs?

If we want to be effective witnesses, have to strike that same difficult balance in our conversations about Christ. We have to be respectful, and show that we don't fit the stereotype of the judgmental, close-minded Christian that has been created by the media. But we also have to be gutsy enough to stir people up. We have to get them thinking about God, and the things that give meaning and purpose to life, and take the risk that they'll take offense at our words.

We're tempted to ask agenda-driven questions. We're tempted to ask questions that put people in a corner so we can preach at them.

- "Do you know Jesus as your personal Savior?"
- "If you were to die tonight, where do you think you'd end up?"

Those are agenda driven questions that make people want to scream and run.

Provocative questions are open-ended. They invite people to explore what they believe without setting them up for a sermon.

- "What do you think happens when we die?"
- "How do you handle the challenges in your life?"
- "Do you believe in God? If so, how does he impact your life?"
- "Can I pray for you?"

I've been visiting people in the hospital for more than 20 years and I can count on one hand the number of people that have rejected my offer to pray for them.

The eighth reason Philip is effective is because he isn't worried about his lack of expertise. He speaks with confidence about the things that are close to his heart. And he trusts the Holy Spirit, working through him, to draw the Ethiopian to the Lord.

What kind of training did Philip receive to train him for his missionary work? Academically speaking, it must have been modest. He didn't have a New Testament to guide him. He didn't have access to theology classes and books. Besides that, the training he did have under the apostles in Jerusalem didn't last very long. Compared to many of us, Philip is a neophyte disciple. Yet the Spirit gave Philip what he needed to awaken people's spirits and lead them to Jesus.

Most of us feel completely inadequate as disciple-makers. It doesn't matter how much training we've had: We never feel equipped to speak God's truth into people's lives. We're like wannabe fishermen who have a closet full of reels and poles, and know all about bait and tackle, but have never actually cast a line into the water.

Thank God there are still people in the church who are so excited about what Jesus has done for them, they can't keep quiet. Many of those people are young. Some of them just met the Lord at summer camp or VBS. Most of the rest of them are older people who are new to faith.

They could all use more training. They can barely distinguish a bobber from a lure. But that doesn't stop them from throwing their lines in every body of water they come across. And God love them for it. He delights in using them, as he uses Philip, to hook people's hearts and reel them into the kingdom.

Philip doesn't argue with the Ethiopian.

- He doesn't try to attack the Ethiopian's personal beliefs.
- He doesn't try to score rhetorical points against him
- And he doesn't drag him into an abstract, philosophical discussion.

Instead, he points out to him how what was revealed by the prophet has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He speaks from personal experience, and he keeps the focus on the good news about Jesus . That's the ninth reason why Philip is an effective witness.

We have to get over this fear of not having all the answers. The Lord hasn't called us to act as his attorney. He doesn't need us to prove that he's worthy, or that his gospel is true. Our job is simply to be his witnesses. That means telling our personal story of faith in the context of Jesus' story.

The tenth and last reason Philip is effective is because God multiplies what he sows. That's what God *always* does when we respond to him in faith. He uses our feeble, faltering efforts to start a good infection. In his time, and in his mysterious way, he causes the good we do to go viral.

Luke doesn't tell us what happened when the newly-baptized Ethiopian returned home. He probably talked about Jesus to the queen, and to anyone else who would listen to him, but we can't be sure. We can't quantify exactly how many people were saved because of Philip, and what effect he had on the future church.

Nor can we know what kind of impact we're making in the world, and how many people will be in heaven because of our faithfulness. But the Bible assures us that our efforts to spread God's word are going to bear fruit. Christ promises to multiply our work thirty, sixty, even a hundredfold.

We could all use more training in disciple-making. That's the main reason we're focusing right now on Acts. But what we have to learn, above all, is to love people who don't know God the way God loves them. John says in one of his letters, "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18). If you've been afraid to share your experience of Jesus with others, ask God to fill your heart with his perfect love.

Rick Warren has blazed the trail for many Christians who want to be more effective witnesses. I want to close with a challenge that he issues in his book, *The Purpose Driven Life*.

Is anyone going to be in heaven because of you? Will anyone in heaven be able to say to you, "I want to thank you. I'm here because you cared enough to share the Good News with me"? Imagine the joy of greeting people in heaven whom you helped get there. The eternal salvation of a single soul is more important than anything else you will ever achieve in life.

Lord, give us a burden and concern for people who don't know you. Help us to see them as you do. Help us to care enough to share your gospel with them.

Lord, we admit that at times we're afraid to step out. Please give us new courage to do that. When we're feeling intimidated or scared, remind us that your Word, when spoken, will not return to you empty.

We pray in Christ's holy name. Amen.