

Lessons for Living in a Pagan Culture – Meditations on Acts

(by Jim Hughes) [109/365 – 2026-09-13]

The Ethiopian Eunuch Believed and was Baptized

(Acts 8.36-39)

Philip must have done more than just exegete the verses extracted from Isaiah (Is 53.7-8; Acts 8.32-33) while he was speaking with the Ethiopian eunuch. He must have explained to him the need for faith in Jesus and repentance of sin. He probably also explained to him the purpose and nature of the sacraments—at least of baptism as the sign and seal of faith in Jesus. Since the eunuch requested baptism and Philip baptized him, this indicates that he had understood the teaching he had been provided by Philip.

The eunuch requested baptism in an unconventional manner. He asked, “What *prevents* me from being baptized?” (Acts 8.36). He probably believed that he might not have been eligible for baptism into Christ and the Church, the fulfillment of the true religion typified by the ceremonial system in the OT:

- As a eunuch he probably would have been prohibited from entering the temple court for Jewish males (Dt 23.1) and would have been confined to the court of the Gentiles. With the change of the covenantal sign from circumcision to baptism, he wanted to be sure that he could have that sign applied to himself, as women now can have under the new covenant.
- As a probable Gentile proselyte, he wanted to ensure that he could receive the sign of covenant inclusion without having to be circumcised.

Since Philip baptized him, he was provided with an immediate answer. The barriers which separated Gentiles from Jews have been removed by Christ and the Gospel is extended to all people on earth (Eph 2.11-13).

Philip and the eunuch understood the reasons for water baptism (see, *Error! Reference source not found.*) and how it should be practiced; this includes:

- Baptism is a sign of submission to Christ.
- It is to be applied to all believers and their households, including their children (Acts 2.38-39; Acts 16.15, 33).
- It is a seal of membership in Christ’s covenant community, the Church.
- It is an outward sign of a confession of an inward faith.
- It will not necessarily be accompanied with a manifestation of extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit.
- It is to accompany preaching of the Word. It is not a standalone rite. Neither preaching or the sacraments are to be overvalued or undervalued relative to the other, and they should be administered together.
- It is not to be withheld until after a person has completed catechumen classes. A new believer is to be baptized immediately upon a credible profession of faith (Acts 8.36-38; Acts 16.33). Instruction through preaching and teaching, leading to a growth in biblical knowledge and strengthening of faith should

follow.

Some commentators are emphatic and say that the passage supports (even requires) baptism by full immersion. However, if it requires immersion, then both Philip and the Eunuch would have been immersed since both went ‘into’ the water. The text states “they both went down into the water”. The plain sense is that Philip and the eunuch stepped into a body of water. Although we accept immersion as a valid form of baptism, this verse is not a proof-text for immersion. Instead of focusing on the water (e.g., was it deep enough for immersion), we should focus on the provision of it when it was required. The Holy Spirit was overseeing the incorporation of the eunuch into the Church.

Philip was transported by the Holy Spirit from his meeting with the eunuch. And the eunuch “went on his way rejoicing”, because:

- He understood that the promises in the OT prophets had been fulfilled in his day with the incarnation of the Son of God. He knew that the reports he had heard about Jesus’ death and resurrection, while he had been in Jerusalem worshipping (Acts 8.27), were true—Jesus was the promised Messiah.
- He had been given an inner assurance by the Holy Spirit that he had been granted mercy by God the Father and had been saved from his sins through his faith in Jesus’ work on the cross (Mt 13.44).
- He knew without any doubt that he would eventually be welcomed into everlasting glory (Mt 5.12; Mt 25.21), not because of any works which he had done but because he was covered in the righteousness of Jesus.
- The fear of death could no longer hold a fearsome tyranny over him.
- His mind had been opened to see the folly of the animistic rites and pagan religions (Rom 1.22-23) which would have surrounded him in his homeland in the upper Nile region. The darkness of Satanic deception was dispelled.
- He understood that as a eunuch the prophecy of Isaiah about eunuchs was fulfilled in himself. It is likely that Philip had pointed out the passage (Is 56.3-5) which would have been a few columns of text after where the eunuch had been reading when Philip encountered him (Is 53.7-8). This promise is held out to eunuchs and foreigners—a time was to come when they would be welcomed into the Church.

Every spiritual ‘eunuch’ or ‘foreigner’ to the Gospel who is brought to faith in Jesus can have the same experience of joy which filled the Ethiopian eunuch’s heart (Lk 2.10). Joy upon conversion is a manifestation of the work of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8.8). We need to consider if we continue to rejoice in our salvation.

The conversion of the Ethiopian and his reception into the Church is the beginning of the fulfillment of the words of Jesus as he returned to the Father. He said, the Gospel would go “to the end of the earth” (Acts 1.8). It was carried beyond the edge of the Roman and Greek world as the Ethiopian returned home.