

“A Passion for Personal Evangelism”

Acts 8:26-40

Throughout human history, there have been countless catastrophes, but none perhaps was ever as bad as ‘The Black Death’ that swept across the European continent in the 1300’s. It was a devastating global epidemic of bubonic plague that struck the inhabitants of Europe and parts of Asia from 1347 to 1351. The plague arrived in Europe in October of 1347 when 12 ships from the Black Sea docked in the Sicilian port of Messina. Those who had gathered on the docks were met with a horrifying surprise. Most of the sailors aboard the ships were dead, and those still alive were gravely ill and covered in black splotches that oozed with infection. Sicilian authorities quickly ordered the fleet of “death ships” out of the harbor, but by then it was too late. Over the next five years, the Black Death would kill an estimated 100 million people in Europe—well over a third of the continent’s population.

The Europeans were caught off guard by the disease and ill equipped to address it. The plague itself was extremely contagious. Yet no one knew exactly how the Black Death was transmitted from one person to another, and no one knew how to prevent or treat it. According to one doctor, for example, “instantaneous death occurs when the spirit escaping from the eyes of the sick man strikes the healthy person standing near and looking at the sick.”

Can you imagine members of your family are dying, and yet you are totally clueless as to the cause?

It led to chaos and confusion as people fled from their homes in complete hysteria. Medicinal practices were superstitious as such that the doctors recommended breathing the aroma of flowers and carrying their petals in one’s

pockets in hopes that breathing in good air would alleviate the symptoms of the disease. Covered in black splotches, those who were dying were given spoonfuls of ash to induce coughing in order to get the bad air out of their lungs so it could be replaced with fragrant air.

Historians have been able to piece together that, more than likely, the disease was carried by rats riding in crates that came off of the ships. Fleas from those rats bit humans, who then spread the plague to others through the very coughing that the doctors were inducing.

A lasting relic from the plague made its way into rhyme:

*Ring around the roses,
Pocket full of posies,
Ashes, ashes,
We all fall down.*

Think about that last phrase—‘we all fall down.’ It pretty much sums up the human predicament. No matter how hard we try, no matter how successful we become, no matter what we achieve, we all fall down. We all are faced with the reality of our own mortality. And yet something within us longs for life, for meaning, for significance.

Augustine—“*You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You.*”

Ecclesiastes 3:11—“**He has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.**”

We have eternity in our hearts, humanity shares this universal longing for transcendence, and yet we only get 75 trips around the sun if we are fortunate.

The blackness of death awaits us all. And the reason is that all of us are infected with a terminal disease that we are powerless to save ourselves from—sin.

However, the gospel of Jesus Christ provides us with the cure that we so desperately need! And as those who have been saved, we have been entrusted with the gospel cure and are commanded to share it with someone else in need.

2 Corinthians 5:20—“Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”

As Christ’s representatives on earth, we are commanded to take the message of salvation and share it far and wide. A church that is committed to making disciples has a passion for personal evangelism. We operate with the conviction that it is our responsibility to engage lost people with the gospel. We believe in personal evangelism because God works through individual believers to bring the gospel to the lost.

It is certainly not hard to make people feel guilty about their lack of personal witness. That’s because most of us struggle with our responsibility to be effective witnesses. We get bogged down with fear of the unknown. We worry that we don’t have enough knowledge, worried that another person will ask us questions that we can’t answer.

But more often than not, we are held back by indifference. We don’t care about others enough to share the gospel with them. So we ease our conscience in all sorts of ways while trying to avoid our Lord’s command—“Be My witnesses.”

Nowhere is one-on-one, personal evangelism better illustrated than right here in the eighth chapter of Acts. There is a lot that we can learn from the example of a

godly deacon by the name of Philip. Up until this point, the church has largely been kept locally in the city of Jerusalem. And yet Jesus had given specific commands to His disciples before He went to be with the Father. He said:

Acts 1:8—“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

It takes eight chapters before this is the case. The church had been comfortable in the nest. So God has to ruffle their feathers a bit. He uses persecution to get the church out of Jerusalem and into the rest of the world. It was the martyrdom of Stephen that unleashed a dreadful wave of persecution that was spearheaded by a man named Saul of Tarsus.

Acts 8:1—“And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.”

Verse 4 says that “those who were scattered went about preaching the word.” In other words, they began to take the Great Commission seriously. What might God have to do in our lives to get us to take His mission seriously? He often makes us uncomfortable in order to make us useful.

The main character in the chapter is a man by the name of Philip, who just so happened to be one of the deacons who were selected along with Stephen back in chapter 6. Isn't it interesting that the leading evangelists here in these early chapters in the book of Acts are not the apostles, not professional clergy, but godly laymen. It emphasizes the truth that God wants to use all of us to advance His gospel. No matter who you are, God wants to use you.

Most of chapter 8 is the story of how Philip went to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the good news of salvation in Christ. What God through him was nothing short of a miracle, for crowds of Samaritans turned in faith to the Lord Jesus. So much so that verse 8 says that there was ‘much joy in that city.’

That brings us to the passage that I want us to consider for the remainder of our time. It is the story of how Philip shared the gospel with a certain court official from Ethiopia. It is a picture of one-on-one personal evangelism, the kind that ought to be taking place through us as witnesses as we are scattered all throughout our communities and neighborhoods.

I want to give you a few principles for personal evangelism from this text that I believe you will find to be helpful if you want to take your responsibility as a witness seriously.

A passion for personal evangelism begins with:

1. WALKING with God in close relationship (8:26-27a)

“Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. This is a desert place. And he arose and went.”

Philip had been in the midst of a revival there in Samaria when God called him away. People were being saved, lives were being changed, and the spiritual landscape of the city was radically altered. Had it been me, I would have wanted to remain in an environment like that. Why would anyone ever want to leave? Yet his instructions were clearly given to him—“Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” Notice that verse 26 says that this is a ‘desert place.’ Bible scholars point out that there were two roads

from Jerusalem to Gaza. The Holy Spirit prompts Philip to take the road that was seldom used.

In other words, it was a place that no one would expect God to do something out of the ordinary. The desert places of life are not typically our 'go to' destinations. We are all too eager to remain in Samaria where the action is. How else would Philip have been so sensitive to the leadership of God's Spirit in his life unless he were walking intimately with God? He was ready for the opportunity.

Worship keeps us sensitive to divine opportunities.

What I want you to see is the closeness of relationship that Philip has with the Lord. While this is not explicitly stated in the text, it is there by implication. He is prompted by God's Spirit. He is full of God's Word. And this is something that only comes through an intimate, close relationship with God. You can't get it from a classroom, it doesn't happen through attending a seminar; it comes only a through a prayer closet.

Before we will ever be passionate witnesses, we must first be passionate worshipers. The reason is that witness comes from the overflow of our hearts. Where there is no witness, there has been no worship.

Remember the pattern that we see over and over again in the book of Acts:

- prayer goes up
- power comes down
- people go out

The church goes out to engage a lost and dying world for Christ. Their worship results in witness. God never intended for His church to be a reservoir. Rather,

He intends for it to be a gospel river by which the message of salvation is dispersed throughout a lost world.

It is only as you and I are men and women of prayer and personal worship that we will be faithful witnesses. In fact, the reason that we are to engage in mission is because God desires the worship of those made in His image.

John Piper — *“Missions exists because worship doesn’t. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more.”*

He says that worship is both the fuel for and the goal of mission. The only thing that will sustain a passion for personal witness is a passion for the glory of God. Passion for God’s glory is primary. It is what joyfully motivates our obedience to move out of our comfort zones and into the unknown.

A disciple-making church is the furthest thing from a cloistered community reveling in the God they have found while those they live and work among are in the throes of the Black Death. Instead, true worship in the church motivates an army of witnesses who are unashamed of Christ and are determined to share the gospel cure with others.

2. INITIATING a spiritual conversation (8:27b-31)

“And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. And the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over and join this chariot.’ So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, ‘Do you understand

what you are reading?’ And he said, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’ And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.”

Philip is obedient to the Spirit’s leadership. Once he is in the place where God had told him to be, notice that he just so happens to see an official representative from Ethiopia who had been in Jerusalem. This isn’t coincidental or accidental or incidental—it is providential.

“Candace” —*not a proper name; a title like ‘Pharaoh’*

This eunuch was in charge of the queen’s treasury. In modern terms, we would say that he is the ‘minister of finance’ or the director of the national treasury for all of Ethiopia. This means that he was a man of importance, who more than likely was traveling with a large entourage.

Despite the influential office he held, and despite the riches that he possessed and managed, there was an emptiness in the man’s soul. He had been to Jerusalem to worship, and he left with more questions than he had answers.

John MacArthur points out four things that helped prepare the soil of this man’s heart for the gospel of Christ:

- the sovereign work of the Spirit

God was at work behind the scenes. He maneuvers Philip into the right place at the right time. He sees to it the man from Ethiopia is traveling the road less taken at just the right time. God is arranging the circumstances in an act of mercy and grace.

- the submissive will of Philip

Philip is willing to follow the leadership of God's Spirit in his life, even stepping out in faith and doing something that didn't seem to make sense. Therefore, God uses him as an instrument of salvation. God alone is the One who saves sinners, but He wants to use me and you as His instruments.

- the searching worship of the Ethiopian

Verse 27 says that the eunuch had come to Jerusalem to worship, and yet he is coming away from the holy city with a burden deep down in his soul. He is still searching for the true God. What he had found there was more form than it was substance, religious expression without true spiritual possession. As a eunuch, the law of Moses would have denied him access to the temple and he would have been unable to fully participate in the Jewish worship services.

- the scriptural word of truth

Somehow, the eunuch had come to possess the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. So when Philip sees him, the eunuch is sitting in his chariot reading Scripture, his heart is restless, and he has left Jerusalem with more questions than answers. All of this is providential. The Holy Spirit impresses it upon Philip's heart to join the man's chariot. Look at verse 30:

"So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?'"

God had been preparing the man. Philip then engaged the man. Every time we share the gospel, we must be aware that God always has to go before us to prepare the soil of the heart. Yet it also demands that we engage others first. Obedience to the Great Commission requires us to initiate a spiritual conversation with someone.

Notice the way the eunuch responds in verse 31:

“And he said, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’ And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.”

How can someone who is lost understand the way of salvation unless you or me explain it to them? They aren’t going to figure it out by osmosis. They need someone guide them! They need someone to come alongside them and share the message clearly.

Romans 10:13-14—“For whosoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?”

God does the saving, but He uses human agency to relay the message to those who are perishing.

3. PRESENTING the gospel from Scripture (8:32-35)

“Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: ‘Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearers is silent, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.’ And the eunuch said to Philip, ‘About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?’ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus.”

Passion for personal evangelism begins with worship, with a close relationship with God. It requires that we initiate a spiritual conversation with someone who is lost. Notice that it also demands that we present the gospel from Scripture.

Verse 32 says that the eunuch had been reading from the 53rd chapter of Isaiah, which is perhaps the clearest picture of the gospel in the Old Testament.

Philip is bold in his faith. With courage from God's Spirit and confidence in God's message, he opens his mouth and beginning with the Scripture, he proclaims the good news of Jesus.

The power in personal evangelism is not found in our techniques or methods; power is in the message itself. The life-giving power is found in the Word of God. True knowledge of Him comes only through the Scriptures.

John 5:39—“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about Me.”

Jesus said that all of Scripture points us to Him!

Luke 24:25-27—“O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into His glory? And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.”

We often fail to engage in personal evangelism because we allow ourselves to become intimidated. Yet such intimidation reveals that it doesn't really understand the power of the gospel.

Evangelism is more about surrender than it is skill; it is more about the power of the gospel than it is the personality of the witness; it is more about boldness than it is eloquence.

1 Corinthians 2:1-5—“And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For

decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”

God intends for our evangelistic witness to be lived out with boldness. These days, we've watered our witness down to nothing more than bait and switch. We avoid the offense of the gospel and think that people will respond to Jesus as more of a heavenly buddy than the truth that He is Lord.

2 Corinthians 2:15-17—“For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.”

“Peddlers”—means huckster; the word carries the idea of withholding information or distorting the facts to convince someone

The idea is that even in Paul's day, certain persons were using techniques to avoid being the aroma of death to people. It is this idea that if I engage someone and share Christ with boldness, they will get upset, so I have got to find an approach that doesn't upset anyone.

Let me tell you something—God doesn't want us to talk about His Son like some used car salesman in a plaid suit trying to sell someone a lemon. He doesn't want you and me to sell Jesus to the world like a late night infomercial promising a tonic that will cure male pattern baldness.

Matthew 28:18-19—“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...”

Rebecca Manly Pippert says that fear, not ignorance, is the real reason behind our lack of evangelistic efforts. I would even take it a step further to say that apathy is an even bigger threat to evangelism. We are bored in our Christian life because we've reduced it to nothing more than church services, religious activities, committee meetings, and business as usual. God didn't sacrifice the precious life of His own Son so you could become a bored church member. Jesus Christ died to save you from your sins so that you could become a passionate worshiper who is so intoxicated with His glory that you radiate it and can't wait to share it with others. Losing yourself in the mission of making disciples is where you will find the joy and purpose your life is lacking.

4. INVITING the person to trust Christ (8:36-40)

“And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, ‘See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?’ (And Philip said, ‘If you believe with all your heart, you may.’ And he replied, ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God.’) And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.”

Personal evangelism begins with you walking with God in close relationship. It requires that you and I initiate a spiritual conversation with a lost person. Then, it involves presenting the gospel from the Scriptures to that person.

One final thing that I want you to see is that personal evangelism demands that you invite the person to trust in Jesus Christ. We've not fully shared the gospel of Christ with someone until we have given them the opportunity to receive Christ personally.

Look at the way the eunuch responds to the gospel:

- faith
- confession
- rejoicing

The world around us is being ravaged by the 'Black Death' brought on by sin, and yet you and I have been given the remedy.

I heard about a young salesman was disappointed about losing a big sale, and as he talked with his sales manager he lamented, "I guess it just proves you can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink." The manager replied, "Son, take my advice—your job is not to make him drink. Your job is to make him thirsty." So it is with evangelism. Our lives should be so filled with Christ that they create a thirst in others for the gospel. That's what 'salt' does.

My prayer for our church is that God would raise up an army of passionate, sold out witnesses for the Lord Jesus Christ who frequently and consistently engage lost people with the gospel. Salvation is God's business, for only He can save a person. Yet witnessing is our business. May we be diligent while we have time and opportunity.

The more seed we sow, the greater the harvest we reap.