

The Church's Growth

Acts 8:26-40

Every industry has its buzzwords for what employers are looking for in prospective candidates. Churches are no different. And one of the buzzwords or phrases you'll come across if you spend time perusing job postings for pastoral positions is this: "a demonstrated ability to grow a church."

Churches want to hire pastors that will help them grow. Because every church wants to grow. And that's kind of common sense, in that we have a mission to make Christ known, and we want more people to come to know him, and that ought to translate into more people in a church.

But in the last several decades churches in America have become infatuated with the idea of growth. If you trace some of the history of the modern "Church Growth" movement, you'll see that it started out of a genuine desire "to reach peoples, not just individuals, with the gospel."¹ But that passion eventually fed a *pressure* to grow, and under that pressure, attention became increasingly focused on *methodology*—the formula, the recipe for growth. "Eight Keys for Unlocking Your Church's Growth Potential." "25 Strategies for Rapid Church Growth." Do *this*, and your church will grow.

And not everything the Church Growth movement produced is bad. But it reveals several subtle but strongly-held collective assumptions about what success means in gospel ministry:

- Bigger is better.
- The more strategic your location, the greater impact you can have for the kingdom.
- The larger your platform, the more effective your ministry.

And the result of this is not only the proliferation of the celebrity pastor culture (it's not enough to simply pastor a local congregation, you need have a bigger platform, a conference circuit, book deals); it's also fueled a subtle disdain for more obscure ministry contexts. It's really hard for churches of 30, or 50, or 100 in towns of 500, or 1,000, or 5,000 to find pastors willing to serve there. Despite the fact the average church in America has only 70 participants, and 93% of churches have less than 400 people.² There's a great temptation today to think that ministering in obscurity makes our witness and God's word less effective.

And with that mindset, a lot of people today would feel sorry for Philip in his new ministry assignment in ch. 8:26. Philip is introduced in chapter 6, when the apostles are looking for help overseeing the daily distribution of food and care for widows in the church; he's one of the godly men selected. When the church comes under intense persecution in ch. 7, with the stoning of

¹ Ed Stetzer, "[What's the Deal with the Church Growth Movement? \(part one\)](#)" *Christianity Today*, Oct. 1, 2012.

² [Religious Congregations in 21st Century America](#) (National Congregation Study, 2015), 5-6.

Stephen, Philip finds himself among those scattered outside of Jerusalem, enjoying an extremely fruitful ministry in Samaria. Acts 8:4-8:

Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.⁵ Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ.⁶ And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did.⁷ For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed.⁸ So there was much joy in that city.

Philip is at the forefront of the gospel's expansion beyond Jerusalem—just as Jesus commissioned his church, to bear witness to him first in Jerusalem (chs. 1-7), and then in all Judea and Samaria (1:8). Here we are now as the persecution in Jerusalem pushes the church out, and the gospel now penetrates Samaria (cf. 8:25).

But then, Philip gets a new assignment. And in comparison with the fruitful ministry in Samaria, we can rightly categorize it as unexpected. That's where our story starts: an unexpected assignment.

An Unexpected Assignment (8:26-29)

Verse 26: “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.” Notice how what the author emphasizes in that last comment: this is a *desert place*. Head back down to Jerusalem, and then take the road toward Gaza, which is a desert place. Barren. Empty. Not a big city, an empty place.

That doesn't make a lot of sense to us today. Why would you take your star player, fresh off of his first World Series championship, and send him down to the minor leagues to play ball in front of a few octogenarian yokels, if anyone shows up at all?

But this is God's assignment. An angel of the Lord gave him this instruction. And Philip obeys. Verse 27: “And he rose and went.” And along the way, someone does show up. Or rather Philip encounters someone. “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” (8:27-28).

There, in the middle of nowhere, where you least expect it, Philip encounters a man. And not just a man; we're told several things about him. First, he was Ethiopian—a black man—though what the ancient Greeks called Ethiopia what would have been ancient Nubia, which is divided today between southern Egypt and northern Somalia. This is a sculpture of a Nubian (an Ethiopian in our story) that dates about 100 years before Christ.³



So the man Philip encounters was almost certainly a Gentile. Some suggest perhaps he was a Jewish slave, but Luke was pretty careful to specify in Acts 2 when he was talking about Jews from other nations (2:5); here we get no such thing.

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nubia>.

But he wasn't just any Ethiopian. Second, he was a very important Ethiopian. He was "a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure." Candace here is a title for the queen mother, not a name. And the Candace sometimes ruled for her son.⁴ So in being in charge of the Queen's treasury, he was quite possibly the CFO of Ethiopia. He was an extremely important royal official.

But third, this important royal official of Ethiopia was either a convert to Judaism, or a God-fearing Gentile who was spiritually curious about Israel's God. There reason he is on this road right now is because he is returning from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in order to worship there. And as he is on his journey, he is spending his time reading Israel's Scriptures—the Prophet Isaiah. Remarkable.

But there's one more detail we're given; something mentioned 5 times in the story: he was a *eunuch*. It was common among court officials in the ancient world, as a means of subjugation, to injure their manhood, if you will. You see that among the Persian officials in Esther, for instance. But as a eunuch, this man—despite his curiosity and genuine desire to worship Israel's God, was prohibited from entering the temple. In Deuteronomy 23:1 we learn that no eunuch "shall enter the assembly of the LORD." This great man of importance was physically barren, and spiritually outcast.

And so that's the scene—this unexpected assignment: God sends Philip to a barren place where he encounters a barren man. No great crowds. No masses. This is ministry in obscurity.

And again, many today have a hard time with that. It feels like JV—Junior Varsity. And that's not just true for pastors and churches, it can be true for anyone serving in the church. To feel that if I'm really going to be effective for God, I need a bigger platform, an upfront role. Maybe a title. To get out from behind the scenes, and do something that really matters for God.

And I'm not criticizing aspirations for ministry—the longing to serve the Lord in a particular way. Nor am I criticizing the importance of aligning our service with our gifting—how the Lord has spiritually gifted us to serve him. Too often churches just plug holes with any warm body, rather than helping people understand how God has wired and equipped them, and helping them serve in a way that uses those gifts, not just to accomplish stuff but to equip others.

What we have to be careful of is the idea that ministering in big ways, in noticeable contexts, or ministering to many is somehow more important or more spiritual or strategic than ministering in an obscure place to one person who needs Jesus. Don't be afraid to minister in obscurity.

Philip wasn't. He obeyed God. Look at v. 30. God said, "Go over and join this chariot." "So Philip *ran* to him . . ." (v. 30). He ran. And what follows from this unexpected assignment is a surprising conversation. That's what we have in vv. 30-35.

⁴ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 425.

A Surprising Conversation (8:30-35)

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. (8:30-31)

Now this is like the ideal evangelistic conversation, right? You’re sitting in the coffee shop, and the Lord’s kind of prompting you to talk to someone you notice. So you walk over, praying that this won’t be awkward, and lo and behold they’re reading their Bible, and they ask you to sit down and explain it to them. That “softball” situation we might dream of, is exactly what Philip experiences.

And what better passage for the man to be reading than Isaiah 53? Luke tells us the text he was pondering, from Isaiah 53:7-8:

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer 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.” (8:32-33)

If you’re familiar with the book of Isaiah, you’ll recognize that this is of course one of the four “servant songs” in the book, perhaps the greatest among them, the song of the Suffering Servant. It’s the John 3:16 of the Old Testament. In this same chapter we read such foundational and moving lines as: “But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed” (Isa. 53:5).

Now the verses that the Ethiopian eunuch was meditating on focused more on the injustice of this servant’s suffering, than the substitutionary sacrifice he gave. By why was he willing to endure such injustice, to be led like a lamb to the slaughter? To give his life as a ransom for many, we’re told in v. 12 (cf. Mk. 10:45). Whoever this Servant is, he willingly died in order to take on himself the rightful punishment that others deserved.

So who is he? That’s the eunuch’s question. “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” (Acts 8:34). It’s a question that many have wrestled with for centuries. Is this Servant the nation of Israel, as it clearly is earlier in ch. 41 (“But you, Israel, my servant . . .” 41:8), and as Jewish scholars have insisted for centuries? Is it the prophet, as the Ethiopian eunuch wondered, and as many critical scholars have suggested in recent decades? Or is it someone else? Perhaps a singular person who stands in for the nation, who is and does for them everything they were meant to be and to do, but failed to be and to do. Yes, Israel was to be God’s servant (cf. Isa. 41:8-10). A servant, who, according to ch. 42:6-7, was to be “a light for the nations, to open eyes that are blind.” But Israel fails their job description. In Isaiah 42:19 God laments, “Who is blind but my servant, or deaf as my messenger whom I send?” The servant who was supposed to open the eyes of others was too blind himself. And so God promises in Isaiah 49 to raise up a singular Servant, Israel, who will bring the people of Israel to God. But not only will this one Servant redeem Israel; he will fulfill Israel’s job as a light to all nations. Listen to Isaiah 49:6: God says to his Servant: “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” But how will he

do that? How can this Servant rescue rebels within Israel and outside of Israel? Isaiah 53: By suffering unjustly, being pierced for our transgressions, so that by his wounds we might be healed.

“About whom does the prophet say this?” What a surprising conversation. Who is this servant? Philip says, let me tell you. “Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus” (8:35). Jesus, who begins his ministry in the Gospel of Luke by citing Isaiah 61, saying, “Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk. 4:21). Jesus, whose healing ministry in Matthew 8 “was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: ‘He took our illnesses and bore our diseases’” (Matt. 8:17). Jesus, who defines the purpose of his ministry in Mark 10 in the language of Isaiah 53: “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk. 10:45). Jesus, whom 1 Peter 2 tells us, “committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (1 Pet. 2:22-24).

Who is this man so willing to suffer unjustly, to bring back the rebellious children of Israel and be a light to the nations—to Gentiles like the Ethiopian eunuch? Who is this man who is able to meet us in our barrenness, our emptiness, and fill us with life? Who welcomes the outcast, answers the prayers of those who are far off, and is able to bring us to God? Only Jesus.

What a surprising conversation. But what a great reminder to expect the unexpected in evangelism. To remember that if God is calling us, moving us, sending us to open our mouths and share the good news of Jesus, then maybe—*just maybe*—he’s already at work in the person you’re talking to. We expect that people will think we’re weird. We expect that people don’t want to hear. We expect to be rejected, or at the very least, to have an awkward conversation. But we don’t know what God has already been doing in someone’s life to prepare them for the conversation he sends us to have. Or how we might be part of his work to prepare them for a conversation they’ll have years from now with someone else. Philip had no idea how hungry this man would be for the Lord. That he had just traveled to Jerusalem for worship, or that he would be reading Isaiah. *God did*. Expect the unexpected in evangelism.

And something quite remarkable, surprising, and unexpected happens as a result. That brings us to the final section, vv. 36-40, and a remarkable result.

A Remarkable Result (8:36-40)

All of a sudden, in a barren land with a barren man, life springs forth. You see it in the geography. Where the author went out of his way to specify that this was a “desert place” (v. 26), now, “as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, ‘See, here is water!’” (v. 36). There are “streams in the desert”—one of the great motifs of Isaiah comes to life in this story (cf. Isa. 35:1-2, 5-7; 43:19-21; 44:3-4). But it’s not just the geography; new life bursts forth spiritually for the eunuch, who is excited about seeing water *because* he’s ready to get baptized. “What prevents me from being baptized?” he asks (v. 36).

And the answer is nothing! His ignorance no longer prevents him; he has seen who Jesus is according to God's Word, and by the Spirit that Word and landed it on his heart in faith. His sin cannot prevent him; it has been fully paid for through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. His situation as a eunuch and a foreigner cannot prevent him; Jesus is a light to all nations. This man has become a believer in Jesus, a child of God, a new creation, and stands ready to express his faith and union with Christ through the Christian ceremony of baptism.

Now, just as a little trivia note: you'll notice that there's no v. 37 in your Bibles (if you're reading a modern English translation). That's because there's no v. 37 in any ancient manuscript prior to 800 A.D. What most likely happened is that along the way, someone's marginal explanation, who felt the need to specify that the eunuch actually believed, got mistaken for belonging in the text itself.⁵ But his request for baptism in this story and in this context assumes his personal faith in Jesus. Especially since Philip responds by baptizing him (v. 38).

And in his baptism we see a third sign of life springing forth in the desert. Remember how eunuchs were shut out of the assembly of God's people (cf. Deut. 23:1). How even in this man's recent pilgrimage to Jerusalem, he would have been unable to fully participate, or be fully accepted. His baptism in Christ marks his full acceptance in the family of God. No longer an outcast; no longer cut off. Life springs forth not just personally here, but corporately and covenantally. And again, when you think of the background of Isaiah in this story, what happens here is nothing less than the fulfillment of God's promises in Isaiah 56.

Just three chapters after the text the eunuch is meditating on, God says this through Isaiah:

Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely separate me from his people"; and let not the eunuch say, "Behold, I am a dry tree." [barren, sterile, no family] For thus says the LORD: "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in *my house* and within *my walls* a monument and a name *better* than sons and daughters; I will give them an *everlasting name* that shall not be cut off. "And . . . these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; [they will be welcome in the assembly!] . . . for my house shall be called a house of prayer for *all* peoples." (Isa. 56:3-7)

What God promised to do for the foreigner and the eunuch (of which the Ethiopian is both), those excluded from the assembly of God's people—what God promised to do in bringing them into the assembly and into his presence, and give them an everlasting name—he fulfilled when this man was baptized into the *name* of Jesus Christ. An everlasting name that eternally marks this man as belonging to the community of faith, and belonging to God. A remarkable result.

You don't expect that to happen in the desert. For life to spring forth. And some of us don't expect that to happen in the desert of New England, either. This is a barren land, spiritually speaking. This is hard soil. And that's true. But we can trust the Word of God to bear fruit in barren places. As God says in another place in Isaiah:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so

⁵ See Schnabel, 428, n. 22.

shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (55:10-11)

That is a promise. We see it come alive in our story. And if we're watching for it, we can see it in our lives every day. The church's growth does not depend on gimmicks, or finding the right methodology (as helpful as strategy might be). The church's growth comes through the Spirit-empowered proclamation of God's Word. It's the Word of God that does the work of God as the Spirit applies it to people's lives. And the gospel of Jesus has the power to bear fruit in the most barren of people and places.

The story moves on, and Philip moves on (transported miraculously some how), where he continues to preach the gospel along the coastal towns of the Mediterranean (Acts 8:39-40). And the Ethiopian moves on as well, though he'll never be the same. We're told that the eunuch "went on his way rejoicing." *Rejoicing*. Everything had changed.

And that's what we want for others in coming to know Christ. It's not about a political agenda. It's not about being right. It's about *joy*—real joy, lasting joy. Not the stuff that excites for a moment and leaves you feeling even emptier later on. A joy that transcends anything this world can offer—something better than the family a eunuch will never have, better than the relationship we think will give life, or the career through which we can finally make a name for ourselves. There's only one name that offers lasting, incorruptible, unassailable joy—the name of Jesus. And if we love people, we want them to know that joy.

So if you don't know Jesus, I encourage you to follow the model of the Ethiopian eunuch, and dig into the Bible. Explore the Scriptures and consider what they say about Jesus.

But to the Christian, I ask you: how can they understand if no one explains it to them? Or as Paul puts it in Romans 10, "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? . . . So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." (Rom. 10:14, 17). We need to pray for men and women to be spiritually curious, explore the Scriptures looking for Jesus. But we also need to respond to God's call to go to them, to open our mouths explain to them the good news of Jesus, that they might believe. And to do it wherever God sends us—to the masses, or to the one.

Everybody wants to be D.L. Moody. Moody wrote books. He traveled internationally, preaching the gospel to thousands and thousands of people. Started an influential church in Chicago; founded three colleges. Everyone wants to be like Moody. No one's even heard of Edward Kimball. I don't know if he went to college, or if he ever left the country. I know he never wrote a book. He taught Sunday School, faithfully, every week. And one young man he recruited to his Sunday School class, and with whom he had a chance to sit down and open God's word and explain to him the good news of Jesus, was a man named Dwight L. Moody.

Don't be afraid to minister in obscurity. And expect the unexpected in your evangelism, that God is already at work in ways we can't imagine how. And most of all, trust the Word of God to do its work, to bear fruit in barren places. It will not return void. The gospel of Jesus has the power to bear fruit in the most barren of people and places.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Opening Question

1. When you think of vibrant, growing churches today, what are some of the common characteristics that come to mind?

Questions for Study and Understanding

2. How does the previous section provide important context for what happens in this story?
3. What do we learn about the characters in this story?
4. What surprises do we encounter in the story that move it forward?
5. What does the author seem to be emphasizing in these verses (for clues, look at things like structure, repetition, etc.)?
6. How does this story help us understand how the church grows?
7. How does this story connect to the unfolding story of Acts?

Questions for Reflection and Application

8. What do you think God wants us to know about himself or his mission from this passage?
9. What do you think God is calling us to do in light of this passage?
10. What does that look like for you practically? What keeps you from this? What can help you move forward in it?