

First Contact

7. What's stopping me? (Acts 8:26-40)

Matt 28:18-20 *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age*

Acts 1:8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Wow, what a commission. As we read the early chapters of Acts we read of how the church grew. 3000 on Pentecost. People were added. They then multiplied. Super maths - but all these folks were Jewish converts.

So they were straining to share the gospel in Samaria and the uttermost parts of the earth? Not on your life. Things were good in Jerusalem. God was doing mighty things. Jerusalem Judea, yes - but Samaria and the uttermost parts of the earth? Er, no.

Those who were in our evening sessions know that the gospel got to Samaria, not because the disciples obeyed a call to go, or that they were commissioned. God had to boot them there through the persecution of Saul of Tarsus after the death of Stephen.

The person that took the gospel to Samaria was Philip. He was not one of the apostles - those who had been with Jesus - but one of the Deacons, who were appointed to deal with day to day affairs in the Jerusalem church. He was a pioneer.

Having been pushed into mission, Philip now becomes a pioneer once again, by receiving a call. It wasn't a very promising one for a budding evangelist, or maybe so it seemed

Act 8:26 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road--the desert road--that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza."

After all the heady days in Jerusalem and then in Samaria where the church grew and multiplied, his call was on the road to Gaza - the desert road.

The Desert Road. Deserts don't contain much - and certainly not people. You can just imagine what Philip might have been thinking. Desert? Have I heard the angel correctly? No-one much goes on that road. I might be a witness in the uttermost parts of the earth - but this is pretty uttermost.

Those commissions we read earlier have never been rescinded. They have passed down from generation of disciple to generation. We are called to make disciples of all nations. We are His witnesses.

But sometimes it's comfortable where we are. We are comfortable in our churches. We are happy with our worship. We are happy with our situation.

You know what - I think the apostles were a bit like that too. They were happy with their situation. Never mind about the words of Jesus about Samaria and the uttermost parts of the Earth.

What a pity it is that God sometimes has to jolt us out of our comfort zones and help us realise that we are called to other things.

In some ways that's our situation here. We are called to leave our comfort zone. And I know that we have not found that easy. But we also know that it has been a necessity. Not only does the good news have to be made known in Swaffham - quite simply the witness of this fellowship would have not lasted another generation. We are driven out of our comfort zone.

But where to? Swaffham. We are called to be His witnesses in Swaffham. Did you know in the late 1850s and early 1860s there was a revival in this country? And it affected Swaffham. This building is a product. Churches grew.

What a contrast we have today. We look out into a spiritual desert when God's people are struggling. And we are being called out of our comfort zones and into the desert!

This is an exciting time for us in many ways. Our first holiday club, our first Alpha courses, participation in the carnival, work amongst Portuguese speakers. But perhaps you are thinking what Philip was thinking as he started walking towards Gaza on the desert road? It's desert. This is Norfolk. Nothing happens in Norfolk.

The difference was that this was a call of God and something did happen. And for us, we need to heed God's call. Philip, listened and obeyed and a person's life was changed - and perhaps it went beyond that.

What about us. As a church and as individuals we are called to obey. We are His witnesses. I mentioned in the Cross Roads magazine that we should become an Antioch Church. A church that listens to the voice of God and then does it. That's what they did in Antioch. Through it Paul and Barnabas were commissioned and it led to a massive spread of God's word. We are called to obey. Lives are changed when we obey. That is the nature of the Great Commission. Those of you involved in the Holiday Club next week; be expectant. You are His witnesses. Have that expectancy that young people are going to be brought to Christ. Lives change when people obey.

So what about the changed life here? Those of you who did the Sharing Jesus course will know that when we seek to witness, or just go about our daily lives, that we should pray for “divine appointments”. Philip’s divine appointment was an Ethiopian eunuch. He was no ordinary Ethiopian:

27 So he started out, 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, 28 and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. 29 The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." 30 Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. 31 "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. 32 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. 33 In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth." 34 The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" 35 Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

The chances were that this man was probably Jewish either by birth or conversion. The Ethiopians have a long history of Judaism which they claim dates back to the Queen of Sheba. They also have a long tradition of Christianity which their tradition dates back to this man. It’s plausible because he wasn’t any ordinary Ethiopian. He was in charge of the treasury - a very, very influential man. Lives were changed because Philip obeyed and went down that Gaza road.

Where are you being called to. Who are you being called to. You are His witnesses. You notice I didn’t use the word evangelist. God calls people and equips them as evangelists but we are His witnesses - all of us. Are we ready to obey. It’s a recurrent theme in the New Testament. We see so many examples of blessing because people were prepared to listen to the voice of God and do it even though they, like Philip, could not see the product in it.

The best example of obedience was the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. We are going to celebrate in a few moments that act of obedience that purchased our salvation.

We are the children of God. Let’s act like it and start listening to the voice of God and doing it. I sometimes think that adult Christians act like teenagers when we hear God’s voice. We act as though it doesn’t apply to us. Or only if it suits.

What do you say as a parent when your teenagers act like that? So when we behave like that before a holy God - what about Him?

Yet in not doing His will we miss out on the blessing. If Philip had not walked that road, he would have missed the Ethiopian and all the blessings and glory

to God that came out of it. Sadly that's true of the Church in this country today. Let's read on.

36 As they travelled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" 37 38 And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. 39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.

They move on until they find water. Here was a man who had found Christ through Philip's explanation of Isaiah 53. What's the first thing he wants to do - get baptised.

Why get baptised? We learn from the NT that conversion and baptism came together. Why? It was to demonstrate what had happened to them. Baptism always of believers and always of initiation.

- Mark of repentance - started with John the Baptist.
- Mark of cleansing - sin had been washed away
- Mark of identification with Christ - we have died with Him, we are free from sin - we are risen and we live a new life
- An encounter with God - Jesus had one.
- Jesus commands it - the great commission - He was our example.

What hinders me? What hinders you. Jesus commands it. Why haven't you been baptised?

- ➡ theological reasons?
- ➡ personal reasons?
- ➡ imperfection reasons?

What hinders you? What do you miss out on? You're not answerable to me - you're answerable to Jesus. You miss out on the blessings that a simple act of obedience brings. You're not moving on.

The most important thing in all this is that God wants to use us to pour out His blessings on people and often it all lands back on us too? Why don't we?

