

# Share the Word

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Acts 8:26-40

Sermon Series:  
God's Big Story

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**W**e have been preaching through God's Big Story, and presently we are in the book of Acts. The end of chapter 8 marks a transition in the book of Acts. Up until this point, the gospel had been proclaimed primarily in Jerusalem. The stoning of Stephen was the first death in the Christian church and marked the beginning of a great persecution that led many to flee Jerusalem.

We see the church fulfilling Jesus' words in Acts 1:8: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." The first part of Acts 8 describes the ministry in the region of Samaria, but this morning we are going to look at Acts 8:26-40 and how God used Philip, one of the deacons appointed in Acts 6, in reaching the ends of the earth as he stepped out to share the Word with an Ethiopian man.

Many of us who read this may think, wow, that guy really had a gift for evangelism, which is undoubtedly true. But I think this passage and Philip's example have a lot to say to all of us about how we, too, can live faithfully, witness boldly and share the word with others. For my sermon outline this morning, I am going to use an

acrostic: We are to SHARE the word in our sphere of influence, empowered by the Holy Spirit, across cultures by being relational and explaining the Word of God.

First, we are to share the Word in our sphere of influence. One of the most striking things that leaps out of the passage is Philip's availability. Even in the midst of persecution and suffering, he and other believers are available where they are to share the good news of Christ. They aren't looking for different circumstances that are less hostile. They recognize the good news they have, and wherever they find themselves, that is where they share the good news.

All of us will find ourselves in many different kinds of circumstances over the course of our lives. Wherever we are, whatever we are doing, we can share the Word of God with those in our sphere of influence. I think of my sister, whose husband got a job teaching at a university in the Middle East, and how God is using their whole family to be witnesses to people from around the world. I think of a 30-something-year-old friend from our former church, who has struggled with the effects of bone cancer over the last 12 years and how she has shared with countless healthcare professionals over the course of her many surgeries, treatments, and rehab. I think of a 90-year-old friend who fell last November and has

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been in four different hospitals and nursing homes since then and how she has brought the love, grace, and good news of Christ to the people in each of these places.

God calls us to share our faith wherever we find ourselves. Most of the time this happens in our natural spheres of influence—those relationships that already exist in our families, with friends, in our neighborhoods and in our work or school environments. We are called to proclaim the gospel in word and deed to those we are in relationship with day in and day out. This is part of our calling, our vocation as followers of Christ.

Sometimes in the midst of everyday life, we are called to “get up and go” to a particular person or group, as Philip was called to go to the Ethiopian traveler. I’m so thankful for the 120 volunteers from VBS this past week and the many going on summer mission projects who have heeded that call to share the good news with people God brings to them. Think about your life. Where does God have you right now? Who are the people and what are the circumstances in your life? To whom might God be calling you “to get up and go to”?

Richard C. Halverson’s benediction, which Stan often uses and is printed on the back of the devotional book our church is using, is so relevant here and speaks to sharing the word in our sphere of influence: “Wherever you go, God is sending you, wherever you are, God has put you there, He has a purpose in your being there. Christ who indwells you has something

He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in His grace and love and power.”

We are to SHARE the Word in our sphere of influence in the power of the Holy Spirit. This account of the early church is referred to as the Acts of the Apostles, but it is actually the Acts of the Holy Spirit through the Apostles. The Holy Spirit used their words to cut to the hearts of those who heard and many believed. The Holy Spirit did miraculous deeds through the apostles, and many people were healed physically and released from emotional and spiritual bondage.

I find many today are often fearful or at least uneasy about sharing Christ with others. Perhaps we are afraid of offending others or lack confidence in knowledge or ability to articulate the gospel. While it’s good to hone our knowledge and skills, what is most important in evangelism is relying on the power of the Holy Spirit to fill us and use us to share what we have seen and heard.

Another feature of this passage I find so reassuring is to see how the Holy Spirit was not only working through Philip but was also working in the heart of the Ethiopian, as well. His heart had been prepared by the Holy Spirit even before Philip spoke to him. I have experienced this many times in ministry, but perhaps the most dramatic experience was when I spent a year in Russia in the early '90s. As we shared with individuals, we saw significant numbers of people coming to Christ. As we started a Bible study, we saw hundreds of people coming out to

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learn about the Word of God. There was no way we could take credit for any of this. The Holy Spirit had been at work preparing the hearts of people long before my teammates and I came on the scene.

But we don't have to go around the world to experience this. We can also expect this as we share Christ with others right here, right now. God goes before us and is working. We don't always see this, of course, but it happens often enough for us to realize that God can lead us to people whom he has already prepared to listen to what we have to say.

We are to SHARE the Word in our sphere of influence, empowered by the Holy Spirit across cultures. Philip was called to share the Word with someone across cultures and across racial and ethnic barriers. Tradition has it that this Ethiopian man took the gospel home and shared it with others, and that is how the church started there. It's important not to hold back from relating to those who are different from us.

This is not only the application of this text but for all of Acts. The church is now meant to transcend the ethnic and cultural barriers of Judaism to expand to the ends of the world. In Revelation 5:9, we read that with his blood, Christ has purchased "...people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation and made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God..." The good news of Jesus Christ is for all peoples.

This is especially relevant to those of us who live in Northern Virginia, as one in five people are immigrants. Just as the Ethiopian was traveling through the region and God sent Philip to him, God has brought the world to our doorstep. We, too, have the privilege of sharing the good news of Christ across cultures without even leaving our neighborhoods. I'm so thankful for the ESOL ministry in our church that is reaching out in love to teach English to hundreds of immigrants from over 50 countries. This is one meaningful way of applying this text and being a part of fulfilling the commission to be Christ's witnesses to the ends of the earth.

Not only are we to SHARE the Word in our spheres of influence, empowered by the Holy Spirit across cultures, but we are also called to be relational. We can build relationships over a long period of time, but it's possible to express love and concern to those whom we are with for a brief period of time, as Philip did in this passage.

How was Philip relational? In verse 30, we see how Philip observed the situation and was attentive to what the Ethiopian was doing, asked him a relevant question about what he was reading, and was available to assist in the way the man wanted and needed. This is a model of being relational. Rather than focusing on ourselves or on what we are saying, we need to focus on the other person and his/her needs and cultivate a relationship. Then we will be able to hear the questions they have and not the ones

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we want to answer. We will be able to ask meaningful questions and listen for the answers and come alongside them to be with them and assist them in ways that are truly helpful.

I have found that as I genuinely listen to people and ask them questions about their lives, they in turn will ask me questions about my life. Natural opportunities for sharing my faith arise in the course of normal conversation.

While it's important to SHARE the Word in our spheres of influence, empowered by the Holy Spirit, across cultures by being relational, we must not neglect explaining the Word. This passage gives a wonderful model of what it means to explain the Word, which includes the written Word of God in Scripture, the Living Word of God in Christ, and the proclaimed Word of God in the Gospel.

First, Philip explains Scripture, the written Word of God. The eunuch is reading Isaiah, and notices that Philip is familiar with the passage. He knows the big story and is able to identify its place in the present story of redemption about Christ and in this particular person's life.

Friends, we, too, need to know the Scripture. And we need to be able to connect the experiences of our lives with the stream of God's action in history. That is why we are spending 18 months looking at God's Big Story. In our information age, there is more to know than we can possibly learn. But, sadly, many of us are failing to learn what really matters most. In

his wonderful book *Eat This Book*, Eugene Peterson writes, "I want to pull the Christian Scriptures back from the margins of the contemporary imagination where they have been so rudely elbowed by their glamorous competitors, and reestablish them at the center as the text for living the Christian life deeply and well."

Friends, it is vital to our lives that we really know and apply God's written Word. Peterson goes on to say, "Christians feed on Scripture. Holy Scripture nurtures the holy community as food nurtures the human body. Christians don't simply learn or study or use Scripture; we assimilate it, take it into our lives in such a way that it gets metabolized into acts of love, cups of cold water, missions into all the world. Healing and evangelism and justice in Jesus' name, hands raised in adoration of the Father, feet washed in company with the Son."

Feeding on Scripture means reading it—large sections at a time; studying it diligently, perhaps under a good teacher in a Bible study or adult education class; memorizing and meditating on it to move the truth of God's word from our head to our hearts. In his excellent book *Shaped by the Word*, Robert Mulholland, Jr. says the point is not to know more but to know God. This is probably the best book I have read on the power of Scripture in spiritual formation and how we are not merely seeking information but transformation. The goal of Scripture is to point us to Christ and help us become more like him.

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Not only does Philip model the importance of knowing and explaining God's written Word, his message explains who Christ is—the Living Word of God. Look at verse 34: "After reading the scripture, the eunuch asked Philip, 'About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?' Then Philip began to speak and, starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus."

Christ is the heart of the Scripture. Everything in the Bible either looks forward to Christ or flows from Christ. Philip naturally moved from explaining Scripture to explaining about Jesus. We don't have the particulars of what he said, but undoubtedly Philip was thoroughly acquainted with the life of Christ's incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension—so much so he could explain them to another. You and I need to know and understand the events of Christ's life, and the way we do that is through reading through the Gospels again and again.

In his book *Life with God: Reading the Bible for Spiritual Transformation*, Richard Foster writes that through the Gospels "Jesus ushers us completely into the with-God life, a life that in and through him who is the way, and the truth, and the life (John 14:6) ...disciples are 'to obey everything that I have commanded you,' and to teach others to do the same (Matthew 28:20). Obedience means to bring our inner person into such a transformed condition

that the deeds of Christ naturally arise out of it."

Philip explains the Word of God written in Scripture and moves to explaining the Living Word of God in Christ and what it means to follow him. And in doing so, Philip explains the Gospel—the proclaimed word of God. While Philip started where the eunuch was in answering his question, Philip is able to move the eunuch to where he needs to be by proclaiming the good news in Jesus Christ.

What is interesting to note is that the Ethiopian realized that he needed to respond to Philip's message. We are not told how Philip helped the Ethiopian come to this point, but here, as in all the evangelistic situations in Acts, a response is implied. The eunuch is so convinced that he is ready and willing to be baptized. In the Bible, there is no such thing as a believer who is not baptized. Baptism is the outward sign of an inward reality that comes through faith in Christ symbolizing the washing away of sin, the renewing of the Holy Spirit, and the identification with Christ and his family. In our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition, we believe that inward reality is not tied to the act of pouring water but to faith—the present faith of adult believers or a future faith in the case of infants, like those baptized today.

We believe that the children who have been born into believing families are already experiencing God's love and grace and are already identified with His family. Did you hear the baptism questions? The promise of the parents affirms their

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faith in the Living Word, Jesus Christ, and their commitment to obey his Written word in Scripture, and their intention to proclaim the gospel by teaching the word to their children until they, too, come to faith. We, as a congregation, made a promise to share the Word as we support the parents. How are you doing at fulfilling that promise you made today—and those you made as a new member?

My hope and prayer is that you will leave today with a vision of the kind of life God wants you to live—not just Philip the evangelist in the book of Acts, or Philip the evangelism director at VPC, or someone else somewhere else. God has called all of us to share His Word in the context of our ordinary, everyday lives. Before the end of the day, I hope you will reflect on your everyday life and think and pray about how God wants to use you to SHARE His Word in the relationships and environments you find yourself in. If you feel you need some additional equipping, start now. Do something this summer:

- Stop by the bookstore and look over the table of resources available for helping you read the Bible and share your faith.
- Join a Sunday School class, a small group, or Bible study.
- Talk to our own VPC Philip the evangelist. Phil Kratovil would love to spend time with you individually or with your small group equipping you to share the gospel with others.

- Participate in the End of Summer Service the Sunday of Labor Day weekend and join others here at VPC in serving creatively and witnessing boldly. Pick up a card and stop by the table today.

I don't know what it is calling you particularly to do, but I do know God wants to use you as an instrument of His love and grace in sharing His Word with others.

