

HE WENT ON HIS WAY REJOICING
The Salvation Experience of an
African Executive
Acts 8:26-40

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This article drives home some important principles of evangelism by examining the biblical narrative of the Ethiopian Eunuch. It is an insightful and delightful exposition of a well known biblical narrative but from a distinctive perspective. Originally, this paper was delivered at a plenary session during the recent Amsterdam 2000 conference of itinerant evangelists, July 29-August 6, 2000.

The Ethiopian¹ official in this passage is referred to as the Head of Treasury for the Government of Candace, Queen of the Ethiopians. He was the equivalent of a Minister of Finance for a national government. The word 'Candace' referred to a title of the Queen of the Ethiopians. It was not an actual name of the individual, but rather that of the dynasty.² It is like the title of Pharaoh, used for Egyptian kings. It is significant to note that this **Mr. Dela Adadevoh** is the Campus Crusade for Christ International Vice President for Africa, Middle East and Central Asia. Born in Ghana, he earned a BS (Honours) in Chemistry from Kwame Nkrumah University in 1979, an MA from Azusa Pacific University in 1994 and is currently completing a Ph.D. in theology from Leeds University in UK.

¹ The word, "Ethiopian", is a Greek word meaning "a man with a sun burned face". Ethiopia and Cush (the Hebrew word meaning "dark skinned") are used interchangeably in the Bible to refer to dark skinned Africans. See William D. McKissic, Snr., in *Beyond Roots: In Search of Blacks in the Bible* (Wenonah, New Jersey: Renaissance Productions, 1990), p. 20.

² A.R. Fausset, *Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Pub. House, 1977), p. 110.

African provides evidence of women holding high positions or offices in governments and armies.

The appropriateness of designating this Ethiopian executive as a eunuch is questionable. Merrill Tenney explains that the word 'eunuch' means a male official of high standing in a royal court or household, and only secondarily implies a castrated person.³ What was a female political leader who held the highest office in the government of the Ethiopians and had male ministers of state serving under her leadership. This, though unusual, was not completely unique,⁴ since there is record of an African woman as Pharaoh over Egypt. Historical information from other regions of Tenney considers as the secondary meaning of 'eunuch' is the primary meaning attached to the word in its contemporary usage. According to Metzger and Coogan, the context largely determines whether the Hebrew word *saris*⁴ should be translated 'eunuch' or simply 'official'.⁵ This story of the Ethiopian official does not give enough clues to justify the conclusion that he was a castrated official. The main point here is that we are dealing with an African official of every high standing, whether or not he was a eunuch.

According to Luke, the Ethiopian official traveled in his own chariot to Jerusalem to worship. Since he was reading the prophecies of Isaiah on his way back home, it is obvious someone else was driving his chariot. The chariot could have been the personal property of the Ethiopian official or a government vehicle. The absence of any further elaboration on this issue by the author makes it safe to assume that the chariot was the personal vehicle of the Ethiopian government official.

³ Merrill C. Tenney & Steven Barabas (eds.), *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Pub. House, 1976), p. 415.

⁴ The Hebrew word for *eunuch* according to both Merrill Tenney and Metzger Coogan is probably a loan word from the Akkadian word, *sa resi*, which means "he of the head".

⁵ Bruce M. Metzger & Michael D. Coogan (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 205.

The granting of permission by the government of Candace for a high ranking official to travel to Jerusalem to worship Yahweh could either mean that the Ethiopian government identified with the Judeo-Christian faith or that there was freedom of religion in Ethiopia. There was also a route linking Africa and Jerusalem, establishing the possibility of cultural exchanges between the Jews and Africans prior to and during the period of the inauguration of the Christian faith.

The Ethiopian official was a highly educated African who took keen interest in understanding prophecies and other texts concerning the God of the Jews and all peoples. This is quite consistent with the records on other educated Africans who served in the governments of Judah and Israel as administrators. There is the example of Jehudi (Jeremiah 36:11-26) who read the prophecies of Jeremiah recorded by Baruch to Jehoiakim, King of Judah. There is also the example of Ebed-Melech, an educated African official who served in the palace of Zedekiah (Jeremiah 38:7). Zedekiah was made King of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon (Jeremiah 37:10). The above examples point out that highly educated Africans served directly with different governments in Israel. It is possible that they and other Africans in Jerusalem passed on what they learned about Yahweh and later on Jewish Christianity to their fellow Africans who were living in Africa.

This explains the interest of the Ethiopian official in the Messianic prophecies of Isaiah. The Ethiopian official was reading the prophecies of Isaiah concerning the sufferings and the death of Jesus Christ, but could not understand it. The Ethiopian official was not lacking in the intellectual ability to comprehend the passage but rather the understanding of the spiritual sense and significance of the messianic prophecy. The Ethiopian official was reading aloud Isaiah, and Philip, who in obedience to the Spirit's call had come alongside to listen, asked the Ethiopian official if he understood what he was reading (Acts 8:30).

Philip's response to the call of the Holy Spirit to come alongside the official is a great example. Philip ran to the chariot the Ethiopian official was riding in. That is the kind of response that should characterise obedient servants of God. When it is certain

that God has called us to bring the good news to a particular people, we should make haste to serve God's purpose.

God's special calling on Philip to come alongside this African executive shows His love for Africans and all the people of the world. The Holy Spirit took the initiative to ensure that the gospel reached the interior of Africa. Such particularisation of God's grace toward Africa must inspire African Christians to live faithfully in a manner worthy of the gospel, as well as to be faithful in spreading the good news to other lands. African Christians should run like Philip did, full of the Holy Spirit and joy, in spreading the good news with all peoples of the world.

The response of the Ethiopian official was very much on target as a challenge to Philip. He said, 'How can I understand unless someone explains it to me?' (Acts 8:31). The transforming effect of the gospel on an individual's life is very much dependent on the person's grasp and understanding of the significance of the gospel message to his or her life. Such an understanding is only possible through explanation. This was the role Philip had to play as the evangelist of the gospel of Christ.

There are many people in the African Church today who have the religious zeal in the name of Christ, but do not understand the spiritual sense of the gospel message and its significance for their lives. Even though they sacrifice so much in terms of time, finances, and their very lives, they need evangelists and teachers who will explain the gospel message to them. A lot of our evangelism today has very little explaining in it.

Philip listened long enough to know what the Ethiopian official was reading and as such, the kind of explanation he needed. For evangelism to be effective, the evangelists need to listen and observe long enough to know what their audience is seeking to understand. It is only then that they are able to offer explanations that will touch their lives where it matters and bring them to the point of total surrender to the saving grace and power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Pre-packaged evangelistic messages that are insensitive to the questions people are asking will not match the effectiveness that we see in the ministry of Philip.

We are informed that Philip began with that very passage of Scripture that the Ethiopian official was reading (Acts 8:35), but did not end there. Philip continued and went on to present the whole gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Ethiopian official believed and offered to be baptised when they came to some water down the road as they travelled together.

Effective evangelism begins with people where they are. The starting point of evangelism is to respond to questions that people are already asking; aspects of the self-disclosure of God that they are seeking to understand. Helping people understand what God is already doing in their lives prepares them to appreciate the complete gospel message. However, effective evangelism always has as its goal the presentation of the total gospel message, and the whole counsel of God.

People are helped to understand aspects of God's self-disclosure they are already striving to understand and then led through the rest of the gospel message.

Evangelism involves bringing people to the point of understanding and experiencing the whole gospel message and the whole counsel of God, beginning from where they are in their spiritual quest for salvation. Philip began with the very passage of Scripture the Ethiopian official was reading and then told him the good news of Jesus in its entirety.

The Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the Ethiopian official had to continue on his way. His whole life was one filled with joy and excitement. Luke put it well when he reported that the Ethiopian Minister of State "went on his way rejoicing". The joy of the Ethiopian official is a powerful evidence of the power and goodness of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The person who was lost in his zeal, and pressured with the search for truth finally experiences liberation from the agony and pain of search and is ushered into a state of joy and jubilation. This liberating grace of the Holy Spirit should indeed be what we pray and work for, as we evangelise Africa, and the entire world.

Our vision is to bring many people who are zealous for things concerning Christianity and other religions to the point of discovering Jesus Christ as the Messiah and Saviour of all

humankind. It is our hope that such discovery will bring much jubilation and celebration to Africa and the world because of the liberating grace of the Holy Spirit.

The vision is to see Africans and all peoples of the world going on their way rejoicing and jubilating because they have understood and experienced the good news of Jesus, their Messiah and Saviour. May God raise up many obedient servants who will explain the gospel to the many in Africa and elsewhere, who are seeking to understand the love and salvation of Jesus Christ.