

Philip's Evangelism and Ours

"Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went." Acts 8:4

The destructive energy ignited by Stephen's salvation history message was hardly spent by his brutal death. On that same day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem. No sooner was Stephen murdered and buried than Saul began to destroy the church with brutal and sadistic cruelty. He went from house to house, dragging off men and women and throwing them into prison. Persecution set off the first great evangelistic movement. "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went."

Scattered

Persecution is a particularly effective way not only to scatter the church but to spread the word, because those who pay the price for following Jesus preach the word wherever they go.

The communists gained control of China in 1949. In a little over a year ten thousand Protestant and Catholic foreign missionaries were forced to leave China. Chinese Christians were numbered at approximately 3 million Roman Catholics and three-quarters of a million Protestants. To many Christians, both Chinese and foreign, it seemed that Christianity in China would not survive the brutal persecution that followed (Aikman, 44). Today, however, China's Public Security Bureau, the official police force, has indicated privately that there are at least 25 million Christians in China. Many observers believe that there are three to four times that number attending "unofficial, so-called house churches." David Aikman reports, "the number of Christian believers in China, both Catholic and Protestant, may be closer to 80 million than the official combined Catholic-Protestant figure of 21 million" (Aikman, 7). By God's grace, persecution strengthened and scattered the followers of Christ, causing them to authentically and courageously share the gospel throughout China. They were emboldened by the Spirit and faithful in sharing the gospel.

I believe God not only allows persecution so that Christians are flung out of their comfort zones to share the gospel, but God scatters unbelievers so they will hear the gospel. This was true of my grandparents who immigrated from England to America. They were occasional church-goers in England but they did not know Jesus Christ personally. The ordeal of coming to America with little more than what they could physically carry and starting over, created a spiritual hunger that made them, by God's grace, truly receptive to the gospel. We found this to be true when my parents hosted a Chinese Christian student group in our home. Who knows how many Chinese students who were scattered to America in pursuit of PhD's found Christ? I know some personally who found Christ because they were scattered and heard the word for the first time.

On my first trip to Mongolia, I met believers who had come to Christ in Eastern Europe. The communist government was sending their best and their brightest to Russia and Germany to study. One of our most valuable contacts in Mongolia was a man by the name of Bassanhoo whose first contact with a Christian was his Ethiopian roommate. This Ethiopian believer read his Bible daily and prayed in his dorm room. If he had been discovered as a follower of Christ he would have been reprimanded and sent back to Ethiopia. I'm thankful he risked his education and career, because his quiet testimony had a profound impact on Bassanhoo. However, Bassanhoo did not become a believer until later. He returned to Mongolia and because of his language proficiency worked as a guide for wealthy westerners on hunting trips into the Mongolian wilderness. Doug Coe was one of those westerners who felt led by the Lord to scatter himself and to spread the word wherever he went. By God's grace and the gospel seed that had been sown by the Ethiopian brother, Doug Coe led Bassanhoo to the Lord, and Bassanhoo, in turn, helped Dan Lam and myself start the Union Bible Training Center in Ulaanbaatar.

Another Mongolian brother who came to Christ because he was scattered was Dash ("Dash" is short for Dashdende). Today, Dash is teaching in the Bible school, but his first encounter with believers occurred long before Mongolia was open to the gospel. He was studying in East Germany, where he met some underground believers, who led him to the Lord. His story has always impressed us as a family, because Ginny's cousin, Paul Wyckoff, was routinely going into East Germany and other Eastern block countries to share the gospel. Paul befriended these courageous believers and held discipleship training sessions in clandestine locations.

Scattered for the sake of the gospel is a good thing. Sometimes the impetus is persecution, sometimes it is the direct leading of the Lord, but being scattered is invaluable if it leads to sharing the Message about Jesus. *Acts 8:4* is one of Fel Yultarade's favorite verses, because Filipino believers scatter so well. He used to wonder why the Saudis had all the oil, until waves of Filipinos, many of them followers of Christ, emigrated to the Middle East to find jobs. For sure, Filipinos lament that they have to leave their homeland to find work, but they faithfully spread the gospel wherever they go. They make good missionaries. They are highly relational, culturally adaptable, and they pick-up foreign languages well. Fel draws special attention to the fate that the apostles were left behind in Jerusalem and the new young Christians were scattered. For Fel the question is not *whether* the Lord has called you to be a missionary, but *where* has the Lord called you to be a missionary. Have you been scattered to academia or retail to share the gospel with those who would never come to church?

Sometimes the Lord scatters us and sometimes the Lord brings the scattered to us. In either case it is an opportunity for the gospel of salvation. It could be argued that Christians are more "scattered" today than at any time in history. This fact alone should work in terms of the gospel's favor, but it often does not. Living in the global village may inhibit rather than advance the gospel. Since we rub shoulders with Moslems, Hindus, Buddhists, and a host of contemporary spiritualities, the ideology of religious pluralism prevails and many Christians lose

their voice because they do not want to offend. From the devil's standpoint, pluralism has succeeded where persecution has failed. The truth is Christians may be scattered but they may not spread the word. The idolatrous god of diversity has replaced the Living God of revelation and redemption.

Another practical concern is that in western culture mobility tends to be tied to career advancement and success. Upward mobility can inhibit rather than promote the advance of the gospel. Success scatters us all over the place but we may be too preoccupied with making a living and increasing our standard of living to share the living Lord Jesus and the gospel of life. So it is one thing to be scattered and another thing to be scattered and preach the word. It is one thing to move around the country for work and pleasure and another thing to move around the country and the world to share the gospel.

Back to Jerusalem

We might have expected great deliberations and planning by the apostles for the advance of the gospel outside of Jerusalem and Judah. Jesus had commissioned them, saying, "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" (Mt 28:19). And then just before his Ascension, Jesus promised, "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" (Acts 1:8). But instead of great strategic thinking and planning, Luke simply states, "Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there" (Acts 8:5). No mention of prayer meetings, committee meetings, courses in cross-cultural communications, support raising, or commissioning, just Luke's terse comment and a brief description of Philip's powerful evangelism.

"When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was great joy in that city" (Acts 8:6-8).

Unceremoniously, Philip boldly commenced the world-wide mission of the Church! And it all began in a place filled with ethnic animosity, idolatry, and superstition. Like his Lord, Philip went to Samaria with matter-of-fact determination to share the gospel (Jn 4). The woman at the well, the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:30-37), and the Samaritan leper who returned to give thanks (Lk 17:11-17) were all signs of things to come. The "greater works than these" that Jesus had promised were now happening. Philip proclaimed the Messiah and performed miracles and great joy broke out in the city. The impact of Philip's evangelism was dramatic, but there is no indication that Philip himself was very dramatic.

Today, Chinese believers capture their missionary zeal in their dream of going “Back to Jerusalem.” What Philip began, they feel called of God to finish. One of the early Chinese leaders to espouse this calling was Mark Ma. He explains, “Since the beginning at Pentecost, the pathway of the Gospel has spread, for the greater part, in a westward direction: from Jerusalem to Antioch, to all of Europe; from Europe to America and then to the East; from southeast of China to the northwest; until today from Gansu on westward it can be said there is no firmly established church. You may go westward from Gansu, preaching the Gospel all the way back to Jerusalem, causing the light of the Gospel to complete the circle around this dark world” (quoted in Aikman, 198).

When Mark Ma first sensed this call of God in the 1940s he argued with God. “That section of territory is under the power of Islam, and the Mohammedans are the hardest of all peoples to reach with the Gospel,” Ma complained. But the Almighty responded to Ma saying that the Chinese people were hard, too, but they had been conquered by the Gospel and this responsibility was reserved for them (Aikman, 198). When house church leaders and even some state church leaders met in Beijing in 2002, in what came to be called the Beijing Forum, they strongly embraced the back to Jerusalem mission program. One leader said, “We believe that now that the Gospel has reached China it will follow the old Silk Road back to Jerusalem” (203). What Philip was led by the Spirit of Christ to begin, the Chinese Church aims by God’s grace to finish.

One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism

Luke may have attributed the evangelistic initiative to Philip, but he credited the apostles and the Jerusalem church with validating the advance of the gospel and insisting on the integrity of the Body of Christ. As soon as the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God they sent Peter and John to Samaria. Two issues were immediately dealt with. Contrary to the pattern at Pentecost that combined conversion, baptism and the filling of the Holy Spirit, those who believed and were baptized in the name of Jesus had not received the Holy Spirit. So when Peter and John arrived they prayed that the new believers would receive the Holy Spirit. They placed their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.

Many Pentecostals and Roman Catholics have seen this two-stage initiation as normative for all believers. For Pentecostals, Christians must often wait for a second blessing, that may come some time after their conversion, when they are filled or baptized with the Holy Spirit. For Roman Catholics, the bishop must lay hands on new converts in order for them to receive the Holy Spirit.

It is more likely, however, that this two-stage initiation was exceptional and was meant to unify the Church. The withholding of the Holy Spirit, until the apostles from Jerusalem had prayed for the Samaritan converts, served to demonstrate the solidarity of the believing community which was made up of both Jews and Samaritans. This emphasized that there was one Lord, one faith,

one baptism. In this two-step process we are reminded of just how valuable the unity of the Church is and that the fellowship of believers must not be divided along racial, economic and cultural lines.

The second issue confronting the apostles from Jerusalem was an eccentric believer by the name of Simon Magus, who may be more typical than we care to imagine. Prior to his conversion he was a popular, high profile spiritual leader in the Samaritan community. His magical powers had amazed the people for a long time. As far as they were concerned he deserved to be called the Great Power of God because of his sorcery. But when Philip came and “proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ,” Simon was baptized along with men and women who believed. Was Simon a genuine believer? Based on what Luke writes, I believe he was. Was Simon egotistical, spiritually corrupt, and sinfully confused about how to grow in Christ? Most definitely.

When Simon saw the apostles lay hands on believers and they received the Holy Spirit, he wanted this power for himself and he was willing to pay for it. He offered the apostles money, and said, “Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” Peter’s rebuke was immediate: “May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin” (8:20-23).

This incident proved the value of the apostles’ visit for the purpose of holding the church accountable and working to preserve its integrity. Peter’s confrontation was necessary and timely, just as it had been with Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11). To have placated Simon because of his power and reputation in the community would have been a disaster for the church. In all probability, Simon’s issues were not as unique as we might think. People come into the church out of positions of power and influence in the secular world and expect the same strategies that worked in the world to work for them in the church. They are used to using money to get their way. They rationalize it as just a means to an end, claiming that’s how the world works. Peter identified the deep root of Simon’s problem, when he said, “For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.” Simon’s competitive, egotistical drive to be above others, was a symptom of a deeper sin problem. But there was no short-cut to spiritual power and Peter warned Simon that he must repent and pray to the Lord for forgiveness.

We must be careful not to skip over Simon too quickly because we may be more like Simon than we care to admit. Reflecting on Simon’s example is a lesson for us all.

To the Ends of the Earth

Philip's next assignment was even further south than Samaria, in fact it could be said that Philip was sent to the ends of the earth. The desert road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza is only about 60 miles from Jerusalem but it linked Palestine to Africa. On his way, Philip encounters an Ethiopian who was returning home after having worshiped in Jerusalem. He was an important official, a true seeker after God, who lived at the ends of the earth. The ancient Ethiopian Kingdom corresponds to Nubia or modern Sudan. Even today, Sudan appears to be at the end of the earth. Right from the beginning, Philip, the first missionary-evangelist, goes a long way in establishing the parameters of the Great Commission.

Philip was led by the Lord to leave Jerusalem and head for Gaza. On his way, he met an Ethiopian official in charge of finance who was returning from Jerusalem after worshiping at the temple. Once again the Holy Spirit prompted Philip, saying, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." Philip obeyed and as he neared the chariot he heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. He was reading from Isaiah 53, the words,

"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. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth."

In spite of their obvious social class differences, Philip interrupted the reading with a question. "Do you understand what you are reading?" he asked. The Ethiopian responded, "How can I, unless someone explains it to me?" and then he invited Philip to join him in his chariot. He asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" The Ethiopian was humble, expectant, and ready to learn, qualities that made him receptive to Philip's insight. Luke summarizes what happened next in a line, "Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:26-35).

If Philip had been a biblical scholar he might have started with the scholarly debate over the book of Isaiah's authorship, or discussed the role of the prophets in Israel's history. Such issues are important and have their place, but they would have sidetracked this critical opportunity. Philip wisely began with "the good news about Jesus," who is clearly the subject of this text and the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. Instead of raising peripheral issues and going down an intellectual alleyway, Philip discussed God's great salvation history story. He told him "the good news about Jesus." The Ethiopian's eager desire to be baptized is a clear testimony of his acceptance of Philip's message and his commitment to Christ. Luke deftly describes an encounter that went well beyond a religious dialogue or an intellectual discussion. It was a life-changing experience as all good Bible studies should be. Such studies cannot help but be both evangelizing and edifying.

Many have found it easier to understand the Word by being able to dialogue and ask questions of sincere believers. Not only does the habit of meeting together provide an added incentive for studying the Word, which we might not have if left to ourselves, but our understanding of God's Word is deepened as we study and discuss the Bible with believers who share a strong desire to

know the Word of God. The importance of small group Bible studies has been stressed throughout the history of the church. Philip Spener, a 17th century German Pietist, in his classic work *Pia Desideria*, written in 1675, offered many of the same reasons for small groups that we hear today.

Preaching alone, Spener reasoned, did not provide sufficient opportunity to grasp the meaning of the whole counsel of Scripture. There are just not enough Sundays in the year to do justice to the Bible. Spener wrote, “If we put together all the passages of the Bible which in the course of many years are read [and expounded] to a congregation in one place, they will comprise only a very small part of the Scriptures which have been given to us” (p.88). Spener concluded that the solution was not to be found in private Bible reading, “...Although solitary reading of the Bible at home is in itself a splendid and praiseworthy thing, it does not accomplish enough for most people” (88), because “nobody is present who may from time to time help point out the meaning and purpose of each verse...” (p.90).

What he proposed was “to reintroduce the ancient and apostolic kind of church meeting,” a small group Bible study led by a knowledgeable mentor. Believers could then “fraternally discuss each verse in order to discover its simple meaning and whatever may be useful for the edification of all.” Spener explained, “Anybody who is not satisfied with his understanding of a matter should be permitted to express his doubts and seek further explanation” (p.89). For Spener small Bible study groups gave people “a splendid opportunity to exercise their diligence with respect to the Word of God and modestly ask questions (which they do not always have the courage to discuss with their minister in private) and get answers to them” (p.90). In addition to public preaching and private reading, small groups helped fulfill the admonition of Paul to “Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom...” (Col.3:16). Spener was very hopeful. “If we succeed in getting the people to seek eagerly and diligently in the book of life for their joy, their spiritual life will be wonderfully strengthened and they will become altogether different people” (91).

When I was a teenager my family hosted a Bible study for Chinese students from the University of New York at Buffalo. My brother had become friends with several Chinese Christians and when they needed a place to hold their weekly Bible study he offered our home. The group began with 13 students, but it quickly grew to over 50. Every Friday night they split up into separate language groups, Mandarin, Cantonese, Hakka, and English, for their Bible studies. The fellowship and food attracted many students unfamiliar with the Christian Faith and the Bible. I remember one student from Taiwan, Wang Hsiao Ming, who came early one week and had dinner with our family before the rest of the group arrived. After the meal we passed out Bibles for a short reading. “So this is the Bible,” Wang remarked adding that it was the first time he held a Bible in his hands. Before the year was out he had become a strong believer. We know of 14 Chinese students who overtime came to know Christ and many more who grew in their Faith through this weekly Bible study time. It would be difficult to overestimate the value that these

small group Bible studies played in transforming people's lives.

Philip's Legacy

The similarities and differences between these two evangelistic encounters is striking. Both called for Philip's obedience to the Holy Spirit's unexpected leading. Both the Samaritans and the man from Sudan heard the same message proclaimed, namely, the gospel of Jesus Christ. In both situations, personal confession, water baptism and the confirming presence of the Holy Spirit were important, and both responded with joy (Acts 8:8, 39). But there were differences as well. The cultural, racial, and spiritual differences between a rural Samaritan village and a black African official were about as great as they could be. Diverse religious and cultural backgrounds were hardly new to Philip. There were also great differences in evangelistic method. In Samaria, the Holy Spirit reinforced Philip's public preaching with miraculous signs, but in the desert with the African official there was nothing more than Philip's plain spoken personal dialogue. Luke made a great deal of the apostle's endorsement of the believers in Samaria, but nothing is said about the African official, except that he "went on his way rejoicing."

Judging from Philip's experience, missions is an adventure that depends on the Holy Spirit's leading, power and wisdom, where being scattered for the sake of the gospel and being called to proclaim the gospel merge. We need to see ourselves in Philip's shoes, responding as God leads, ready to run alongside as Philip did and speak as directed. Both events seem so spontaneous yet coordinated; God's intervention is made so clear. God brought everything (circumstance) and everyone (participants) together on this occasion.

True evangelism proclaims in word and deed the gospel of Jesus Christ and cuts across all types of cultural, racial, religious and spiritual barriers. And the power of the gospel is seen in transformed lives, who have experienced repentance, conversion, baptism and the filling of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, all those who believe, become in their own right, evangelists and missionaries, scattered abroad, preaching the Message of Jesus Christ.