

A Man Called Phillip
Moving in the Miraculous & Baptizing in Water

(preached by Bruce Morrison Christian Fellowship Church Sunday, March 14, 2010)

Bible Text: Selected passages from the Book of Acts chapters 6 and 8.

Philip - a deacon

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. Acts 6:1-7

There is a tendency in the modern western church to glamorize our greatest ministers. Though it may not be said, great preachers are seen as "stars" and many are fascinated with those whose preaching style is almost theatrical. The bigger the church, the larger the TV audience, the more success attained, all give rise to a *performance - audience* model of ministry.

When we open our Bibles to passages such as the one above, we see attention given to those not in positions of high profile, but to lowly deacons. The word "deacon" carries the idea of "dusty servant" and speaks of those whose ministry carried them over dry dirt roads as they carried out their service to others.

We do nothing wrong when we employ every means at our disposal to spread the gospel. Hollywood quality TV shows and personality types have successfully attracted many to Christ, for which we should all give thanks. But let us be careful not to idealize such methods and run the risk of falling short in our understanding that the greatest abundance of ministry really happens in places where we often get a little dirty!

If it were not for the presence of deacons at First Church of Jerusalem, the apostles would not have been able to attend to the ministry of the Word and prayer, and would have found themselves encumbered by the many administrative tasks of a growing church. Hand in hand, apostle and deacon saw the church multiply beyond what anyone could have imagined.

The qualifications our text sets forth for one to become a deacon are similar to those met by the apostles. They had to be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. In our understanding of New Testament ministry, we need to be careful not to consider some tasks to be “spiritual” and others “menial”. Every task is important. There really is no separation between the physical and the spiritual when it comes to God. He created it all and he sanctifies it all.

As we shall see in the life of Philip the deacon, that the ministry of the lesser can be just as potent as the ministry of the greater. Though the offices held were different, the Bible imposed no limitation on the faith of those in either sphere of service. The deacons worked the same miracles as the apostles. The sincere faith of the 5-year-old child in Sunday school can produce the same miracles as those of the greatest man of God. Position isn't the issue, faith is! We need to encourage this kind of faith in the church.

Whatever self-imposed limitations you might have placed on yourself, or might have been placed on you by others, they dissipate when the truth that God is no respecter of persons is grasped.

Two deacons: Stephen and Philip

Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. 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 paralytics and cripples were healed. So there was great joy in that city. Acts 8:4-8

Of great significance is the fact that God chose two deacons to be the first to demonstrate two very important realities brought about by the birth of the church, that remain in existence to this day. The first was martyrdom and the second was that the gospel is for the whole world, even for Gentiles.

Stephen, also named as one of the seven deacons in chapter 6, was the church's first martyr. He exemplified grace at the highest level. His prayer of forgiveness, for those who falsely accused him and killed him, cut against the grain of every base human passion common to man. Instead of contempt, anger and vengefulness pouring from the heart of this dying deacon, it was love, compassion and hope. We stand transfixed at the death place of this lowly servant with the same awe we hold when we gaze on our dying Saviour. In his death, Stephen manifested a supernatural endurance and meekness that could only come from our Lord Himself.

Philip, on the other hand, was a deacon with a different destiny. When persecution arose after the death of Stephen, he went to Samaria and preached a revival like few ever seen in history. Powerful preaching followed by miracles, healing and deliverance turned the whole city upside down for the gospel. Seldom in our time do we hear of “great joy” coming to a whole population because of one man's ministry. But this is what happened

when Philip went to Samaria. “Greater works than these shall you do” were the words of Jesus and with Philip, it didn’t take long to see them come to pass. Of great importance is the fact that this revival was in a Gentile city. Salvation is for the whole world.

In the midst of the revival, Philip was miraculously transported to a desert where he met a lone Ethiopian sojourner on his way back home. The man was both influential and handicapped. He was a eunuch and was probably made so in order that he may climb the ladder of success. He eventually arrived at the top and became the minister of finance for the queen of Ethiopia. However, an inner emptiness of spirit pervaded his heart that no amount of material success could fill. His recent journey to Jerusalem to worship likely put him in touch with events surrounding the birth and explosion of the first church and quite possibly left him wondering about many things.

On his return journey, riding on his chariot, he searched the scriptures. Suddenly, he met Philip, Philip travelled with him and explained the scriptures from Isaiah that the man was reading, which revealed that Jesus Christ was the one about whom the passage was written. The Ethiopian’s eyes were opened to faith in Christ and he believed and received.

If Philip were alive today, he could easily have the most powerful evangelistic enterprise in the world. His single-handed transformation of an entire city through miracles, signs and wonders would certainly qualify him to be as a “star”. Maybe his TV show would be called, “A Day in the Life of Philip” with tickets to his studio audience going for premium prices! If it could be captured on camera, the ability to defy space and time when traveling from one place to another would certainly have a dramatic effect. Imagine! A real life Star Trek person and a preacher at that! His program ratings would skyrocket.

What’s Your Preference?

Given a choice, which deacon would you pattern your life after, Stephen or Philip? If there were sign-up desks and you could choose to enlist for your life to follow either path, which would you choose? I think I prefer the Philip model and I suspect the queue in front of his desk would be rather congested and lengthy.

I think too that it would come as no surprise to find the line up behind Stephen’s desk would be rather short. While one might reason that those who choose his path get processed a little more speedily, the fact is few would want it. The downsides are rather significant.

The truth is, just as chronologically Stephen came before Philip, the life of sacrifice must precede the life of blessing. We really don’t get to make a choice. The way of death is the only way. The pursuit of a miracle ministry without the pursuit of the cross leads to a state of exaggerated self-importance. The cross before the crown is always the divine order. Prosperity without purpose is not the gift of God. Self-sacrifice, not self-service,

is the nature of the kingdom of God. The dignity our greatest gifts afford us, in no way, renders us exempt from the demands of arduous tasks with less obvious importance.

We are called to die before we can live. This is the paradox of the kingdom of God. This is the life of Christ in us.

Philip and Water Baptism

While Philip is in Samaria, the Bible says:

But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw. Acts 8:12-13.

Later, as Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch traveled along the road together, they came to some water and the eunuch said,

"Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. 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. Acts 8:37-39

You may wonder why, since the stated topic of this sermon is water baptism, it has taken me so long to get to it. There is a reason. In many respects, water baptism is defined by the lives of the two deacons we have been talking about, Stephen and Philip.

First, water baptism is about death. It is testimony that life without salvation through Christ is really not life at all. We were born into this world with a sin nature that would lead to certain death. Through Christ, the grim reaper's claim on us is made void. Baptism demonstrates this. It identifies us with Christ's death, which he died for our sins. By faith, we believe His blood atoned for our sins and they are washed away.

Second, water baptism is about the power of Christ's life in us. It attests that we not only identify with His death, we also join ourselves to His resurrection. By faith we claim that the Spirit's power that we saw at work through Philip, also abides in us and works through us.

Through baptism, we agree with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We agree that the love of the Father is ours, the righteousness of the Son is ours and the power of the Spirit is ours. No contract known to man is more binding or powerful than this.

As seen in the life of Philip, when the Spirit of God is at work amongst us, a response is demanded. The kind of response about which I speak, is more than obedience to a

command that is given. It is more an inner drive, an overflow of joy and life, an effervescence of bubbling and increasing within, all seeking some outward expression. Water baptism is one such outlet, one ordained of God, one that beckons us from the moment we receive Christ as our Saviour.

Though water baptism is a physical act, it should not be seen as separate or different than that which we consider to be more spiritual in nature. It was the works of the Spirit in the life and ministry of Philip, regardless of what he was doing, whether it was healing, deliverance, miracles, preaching or baptism. Though the activities were different, the essence was the same. It was all God at work amongst his people.